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Letter from the Editor

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What will Ninten-do?

There's been a lot of talk lately—mostly under people's breath—about the direction Nintendo seems to be heading of late. It pains us all to see the company responsible for all we survey making such poor decisions (if not for the upcoming *Legend of Zelda*, we'd surely hear cricket sounds emitting from our GameCubes), so I offer one possible scenario as to how this may not be the case (note the word *possible*) at all.

I think the key here—the one variable nobody seems to see or want to admit—is that there's simply too many games coming out each year for most of them to perform at the level they need to support the massive infrastructures gaming companies have built to acquire and market their titles. Too much is being spent on licensing and marketing and not enough on development. It's like this for a reason, but that's a whole other editorial. Licensing deals should be predominantly back-end, making it in both parties' best interest to make a great game. Studios getting either a fat guarantee or most of its money up front leaves the game publisher with two problems: time and money—too little money and too little time to make a truly great game. Such is the majority of this industry, which is why these mighty behemoths keep falling: A few wrong turns and you're history. Their only hope for survival is to copy the current trend, no matter how gratuitous or developer-stifling (these poor studios are becoming akin to sweat shops, it's amazing as many hold together) or spend money on a big franchise and play the odds, since, for the most part, big brands do drive the market.

What does this have to do with Nintendo, you ask? Well, back when they regenerated the game industry, all Nintendo games were system endemic, as in, "only for Nintendo" across the boards. In this age of over-saturation, if Nintendo were to launch the Revolution with a proprietary controller (and not a stinking pen) and strict quality guidelines under the exclusives-only guise and commit to creating four or five bona fide Nintendo-bred franchise games a year, literally everyone who's ever owned a Nintendo system would come, but moreover, third parties would be forced to either spend more time and money on development of their Nintendo division games—releasing fewer but far superior titles to a far less saturated market—or try their luck against the likes of Sony, EA and Microsoft. See, I think the allure of a dedicated, hungry enthusiast-based user base that is actively purchasing nearly every game for the console (because they all rock) beats today's fiasco by a wide

margin. Most likely, every Revolution game would sell well beyond a million copies, and producing fewer games means less overhead on the publisher side. Come down from your ivory tower and pump the money back into development and you'll be able to buy the ivory tower soon enough. The numbers would probably translate to better movie and franchise deals as well, with back-end deals becoming so much more lucrative that studios would be willing to wait for a larger return on a true blockbuster game and moreover continue to earn as the franchise snowballs as a result of the surge in quality. This would also allow many shops to go back to what made this industry great in the first place: designing new, innovative experiences and characters to drive us forward. Where are the new Sonics, Belmonts, Samuses, Marios and Crash Bandicoots of the world going to come from otherwise? Who wouldn't kill for a console with proprietary controller technology and stringent quality control, where only the best games were released? Put Donkey Kong, Wario, Mario, Kid Icarus, Metroid, *Zelda*, etc. back in rotation, along side 20 or so triple-A third-party games and you've got a cottage industry unto itself.

Someone needs to break rank; the three-system market just isn't working. Do I need three identical versions of *Spider-Man 4*? Nintendo once dominated this industry on innovation and quality, and I believe it's their only way back. I also believe they're the only company with a large and religious enough user base to pull it off. There's immense power in Nintendo's brands, but the clock is ticking...loudly. It wasn't until they joined the status quo that things began down this road. Somehow Nintendo's reluctance to put wholesale violence on their machine turned the industry against them; I say they return the favor by taking everyone back to school.

Sameness breeds boredom. It's time for third parties to choose sides and determine a real winner here. Cross pollination of games breeds mediocrity and alienation. The best Xbox games either cannot be made or are weak on PS2, just as Xbox 360 games will one day differ from PS3. With the big three producing fewer and fewer first-party, it's only a matter of time before this becomes a single-format industry, and that wouldn't be any fun.

Dave Halverson Editor In Chief

play magazine staff

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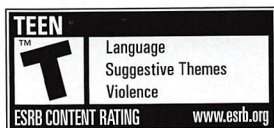


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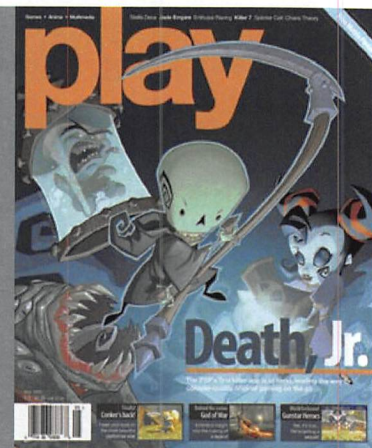
PlayStation 2



PC
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Seeking higher ground

I'm an animator interested in gaming. I read your article and your review of 187 Blah blah BLAM! You are right: black people depicted as thugs, killing each other, is unnecessary and degrading. We already saw *Boys N the Hood* and *Menace II Society*. Those were good movies. But, it is time to move on, as African-Americans and as Americans.

I am black and I am a Marvelite and an Otaku (depending on who you ask). I have a BA in Art and attend Columbia College in Chicago. I don't need ANYONE telling me who I am. I am very tired of ignorant people who assume things about me. This is why I will be moving to Canada. I am very well read and so are many of the characters I animate. Yes you can be black and intelligent AT THE SAME TIME. And, you don't have to be looked up to by racist white people. Do you think Dave Chappelle needs white people's approval? He doesn't. And, I'm sure he thinks these ghetto games are crap, too.

Keep up the good work, man. Gaming should be a release from reality; not a depiction of the worst parts of it. Thanks.

Unsigned

We couldn't agree more, hence the editorial. Canada's cold though...brrrrr.

Fed up with Nintendo...

Whenever I visit Nintendo-related message boards, it never ceases to amaze me in regards to the off-topic and "I'm bored" postings that run rampant. It's sad really, because for a console with as much promise as the DS, you'd think people would still be interested in it by now. And yet, if I had to guess, I'd say that interest is purely a superficial/long-term one: either people are fanboys and like the DS for immature reasons, or else they see hope in it because there are good games coming EVENTUALLY.

But the thing that gets me the most is how most of this apathetic posting is almost entirely the fault of Nintendo of America. In Japan, there are a NUMBER of

good games out for people to talk about, including but not limited to: Another Code, Kirby's Magic Paintbrush [and] Meteos.

And yet, none of these games are out in other countries. None of these games are out in America of all places, which Nintendo viewed as so CRUCIAL to the success of the DS, hence it had the WORLD launch there. I'm sorry, but if I was a North American gamer I'd be mad as hell, as Nintendo has made you all into a bunch of suckers. Buy the Pez Dispenser (the DS) with the promise candy for it is coming (ie the games), yet what arrives is most certainly stale...

Pokémon Dash just released, and Polarium in a few days. Both of these games are (in my opinion, of course) absolute rubbish and, even worse, LAUNCH games for the Japanese DS. You're getting four-month-old games

America is too incompetent (or prohibited) to do its job.

And let's consider you actually like Nintendogs (which I don't; Tamagotchi clones are too immature for me, sorry), which releases this week in Japan. When exactly is THAT game slated for a North American release? Not for months and months and months, just like with everything else. You are waiting months and months for games that released in Japan and which the Japanese are, in fact, long finished with by the time you play them. Then, while you play "yesterday's trash," they get brand new games which you'll have to wait and wait for as well.

Someone remind me please: what year is it? I could swear the calendar indicates 2005, but you'd sure as heck think it was 1986 given the antiquated manner Nintendo/Nintendo of America

"Gaming should be a release from reality; not a depiction of the worst parts of it."

NOW, with absolutely nothing added to them and with absolutely nothing to justify the extensive delay in release.

My question is what the hell is wrong with Nintendo of America? Why is it sitting on its collective ass week after week, doing absolutely nothing? Why did it take three months for the DS WarioWare game to release in North America? Did I miss the RPG mode whereby there were 1000 pages of intensive newspaper-level Japanese text to translate? Why hasn't Meteos released yet? It's a puzzle game. Why hasn't Kirby released yet? It has almost no text period! The ONLY game with a justifiable delay is Another Code, and that hasn't even been officially confirmed for release outside Japan!

I'm sorry, but it just shocks me at how the lot of Nintendo supporters can sit there and remain fanboys and whatnot given the circumstances. It would be one thing if there was a one-two week delay between Japanese game releases and North American releases, but at this point the window is a THREE MONTH+ delay. You have a console with almost nothing at all worth owning simply because Nintendo of

conducts its business practices. I don't get it, are the "inferior foreigners" not "good" enough to get the games closer to the Japanese releases? (I'd say yes, and that the ONLY reason you get them at all is because Nintendo can get your money.) Seems to me that if it wasn't for FOREIGN customers, Nintendo wouldn't even exist at this point, given the miserable failure of the GameCube, especially in Japan.

And yet, despite this foreign "aid," so to speak, Nintendo continues to employ a practice of inconsiderate business decisions and unfair (and at this point in time, unjustified) favoritism. You have idiots like PR "Guru" Reggie Fils-Aime shooting off his mouth about the crap Nintendo plans to do in the future, and how much better the company will be and utter such nonsense. Wake up call: Nintendo needs to start making REAL changes and making them NOW, not just talking about things it wants to do but never will—that's been done for ages now and what do you know, Nintendo is in third place as a result.

Ashley Winchester

Nintendo is at a crossroads. Either they wake up and smell their fleeing minions or sink into obscurity.

The art got him

I've been reading you off the newsstand off and on (more on than off) since your first issue came out when I worked at a Gamestop a few years ago. Don't ask me why I never subscribed. You guys have always had a style that doesn't make me feel ashamed to read an issue on the bus to work. For an artist, your magazine is a gaming magazine that looks at the industry through artists' eyes. So, finally, today I've subscribed, and the absolute kicker was the fact that very-much-respected Dave Halverson referenced Mark Ryden when he was reviewing Psychonauts. It occurred to me that I couldn't think of ANY other gaming magazine that would do something like that. It seems like no big deal to mention some artist's name, but for those who are way into both worlds, it's an amazing achievement for you guys to begin and bridge that gap. I've never wanted to work for Play magazine more than I did after reading this issue. Hire me.

Thanks duders,
Andres

Sorry, we don't hire people who take so long to subscribe...kidding. Send us some samples.

God doesn't load...

I finished God of War and was very pleased by everything it had to offer: fantastic graphics, blood, guts 'n gore (I love killing me some gorgons!), great gameplay. What I liked most about GOW was the seamless loading. I think the word "loading" appeared on the screen only once during the entire game.

Not so with Jade Empire. The load times between areas is infuriating! It's not going to keep me from completing the game, but I'm curious why some games have load times like JE but others don't. Is it more difficult to program a game with

no load times than it is to program one without? Thanks for your time.

Sincerely,
Mark Haley

Pretty sure the loading in Jade is due to the insane amount of spoken dialogue, and the amount of choices attached to each... We couldn't agree more though over how frustrating it is. It's a big part of our 9.0 score. Elsewhere it earned 10s, which, well, how is that possible? What bothers us is why lesser PS2 games load so much...

Sonic's got a gun, his fans have come undone...

Back in the early '90s I knew of sunny little place where green grass grew atop checkered platforms, spinning sunflowers grew and computer monitors dispensed gold coins when jumped on. A little pissed off rebellion of a blue hedgehog named Sonic blazed through this brightly colored world. With his hands tightly clenched in a fist, his eyes slanted downward and his feet spinning in circles, Sonic was on a mission to stop the evil Dr. Robotnik from turning the world's animals into blockhead robot drones. Blockhead, you ask? How else do you explain a group of chompers that jump out of a waterfall in sequence all day, awaiting some helpless victim to cross their bridge? Sonic would run towards his goal as fast as he could. If he gets hit, he just picks up his rings and keeps going. Nothing could stop him, not even a blinking wrecking ball attached to a chain.

Fast-forward to 9-9-99. With a reservation slip and Dreamcast Magazine # 0 tightly grasped under my arm, I eagerly awaited the release of Sega's steamrolling juggernaut of a comeback machine, the Dreamcast. I stood and stared some more for what seemed like days until suddenly what used to be a line became a cluster of pulsating head people, all desiring the same thing I did. When I got home I open the box, which politely stated "Thank you for purchasing this Sega Dreamcast." I immediately put in Sonic Adventure and was impressed by the incredible blob monster intro, but not so impressed with the blaring guitar in the title screen. After a short boss battle I was back into familiar territory. I ran through loops collecting rings, jumped off of springs, ditched Tails numerous times, and even got violently chased by a killer whale with a deep-seeded hatred for blue hedgehogs.

Sonic Adventure was a killer ride, but it wasn't without its flaws. I did not like playing as other characters other than Sonic. I don't want to go fishing or hit things with a cutesy love hammer. Even playing as Tails would reveal how "scripted" the levels were. If you skewed ever so slightly from the "path" buildings would pop out of nowhere, and Tails would tire and fall into the background below. My other problem is not with the camera (as it was with every publication out there) it was with the horrible character voices. Sonic sounds like an Abercrombie/Real World reject. Tails sounds like a metrosexual Steve Urkel. The negative stereotypes didn't stop there. In Sonic Adventure 2, Sonic Team decided that since Sonic has spiked hair he is white and listens to rock music, and since Knuckles has what seems to be dreadlocks he is black and listens to hip-hop.

Now enter 2004, Sonic Heroes is released. Although it was a step in the right direction for 3D Sonic games, the player was still stuck on a path, and you pause momentarily to pull a switch or do a mundane puzzle. Those dammed annoying voices are back, but now they are telling you what to do. "Switch to Knuckles to break this box." No shit Sherlock! There's only a big red sign that says "Knuckles." Was being able to switch characters an innovative way to add flavor or does it

take away from the freedom of the days of old? It seems to me that Sonic Team is digging themselves into a hole. I know that sounds mean, but I am frustrated that they released the mediocre at best Astro Boy rather than working on a new Nights. This is beyond me, the demand has been there for almost a decade now. Personally, I would rather play as a flying jester with purple pajamas rather than a nudist robot.

One gloomy, rainy, Oregon Monday I was watching a story on the Developers Choice Awards on G4's X Play. I was intrigued by the Sonic game montage, but then, suddenly, the show's co-host Morgan Webb warns the audience, "Your worst nightmare has come true, a hedgehog with a gun!" Never in my life would I think I'd see the day my beloved Sonic the Hedgehog franchise would ever use violence to sell a game. I felt like an overly-buff oxen man had broken into my living room, pulled my heart from my chest Mortal Kombat style, and kicked it down a cliff (a very thorny cliff). I imagine Sonic Team as Plankton from the *SpongeBob Movie* yelling, "I'm going to rule the world!" Sonic fans being *SpongeBob* sarcastically waving back, "Well, good luck with that."

This is not all Sonic Team's fault. The casual American gamer is like the residents of Bikini Bottom who walk around with Chum Bucket hats on their heads, buying any blood-soaked violent game such as *Grand Theft Auto* (the Crabby Patty formula) or any clone that comes after it such as *True Crime* (Plan Z).

I hate Shadow the Hedgehog; he's the worst Sonic character ever! He was supposed to die at the end of *Sonic Adventure 2*, his ego is bigger than Fred Durst's and he is in love with a human girl named Maria. We all know interspecies relationships never work out. Gross!

Sonic Team should take a hint I once heard from the depths of Shadowgate, "What you expected has not happened." Maybe they should learn from what Capcom has done in the past. They were able to run both their 2D and 3D series simultaneously. I know that Sonic is Yugi Naka's baby, but maybe he could let a team like Smilebit tackle a 3D Sonic game. If Jet Set Radio and Panzer Dragoon came out beautifully, imagine what Smilebit could do with the Sonic series. As for a 2D game, with the capabilities of the current consoles they could have character sprites as big as they wanted and as many colors as they desired. Also, imagine a Sonic level so big that the player would have to zoom the camera in and out using the left and right triggers. They could call it *Sonic the Hedgehog 4*, go the way of their own 2K Games and sell it for \$19.99.

What does Play think of the new Shadow the Hedgehog game? What about G4?

I personally think it's great that we gamers now have our own little network. Its nice to see that there are people like G4 and Play magazine, out there who believe that video games are not just a waste of time, but a notable form of human expression. Hooray for Earth!

Well, my Mountain Dew is slowly wearing out, so keep on delivering us a visually stunning, thought provoking publication, who doesn't find the need to proclaim they are the #1 video game magazine on their covers.

Stephen K.

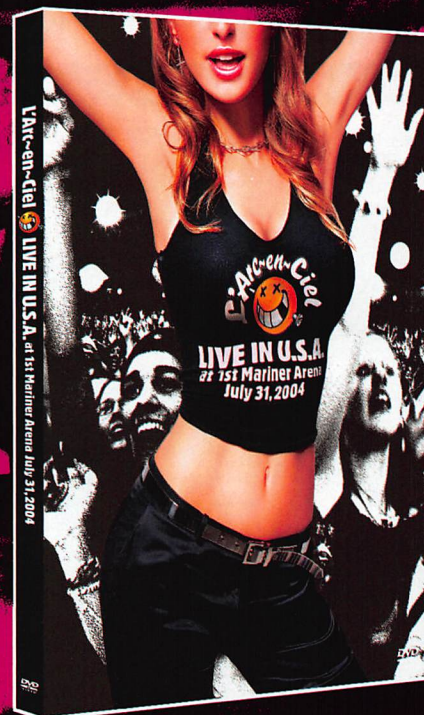
Shadow the Hedgehog was a surprise, but we're not passing judgment until we actually play the game. Looks like Sonic Adventure with a gun, which would indeed be yet another unfortunate choice. We too beg for 2D Sonic and a new NIGHTS, but remember, Sega only does the opposite of what their fans want. It doesn't look like it's ever going to change until Sega Japan and Sega America get on the same page... Right now they're not even reading the same book...

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A farewell to kings

Oddworld call it quits

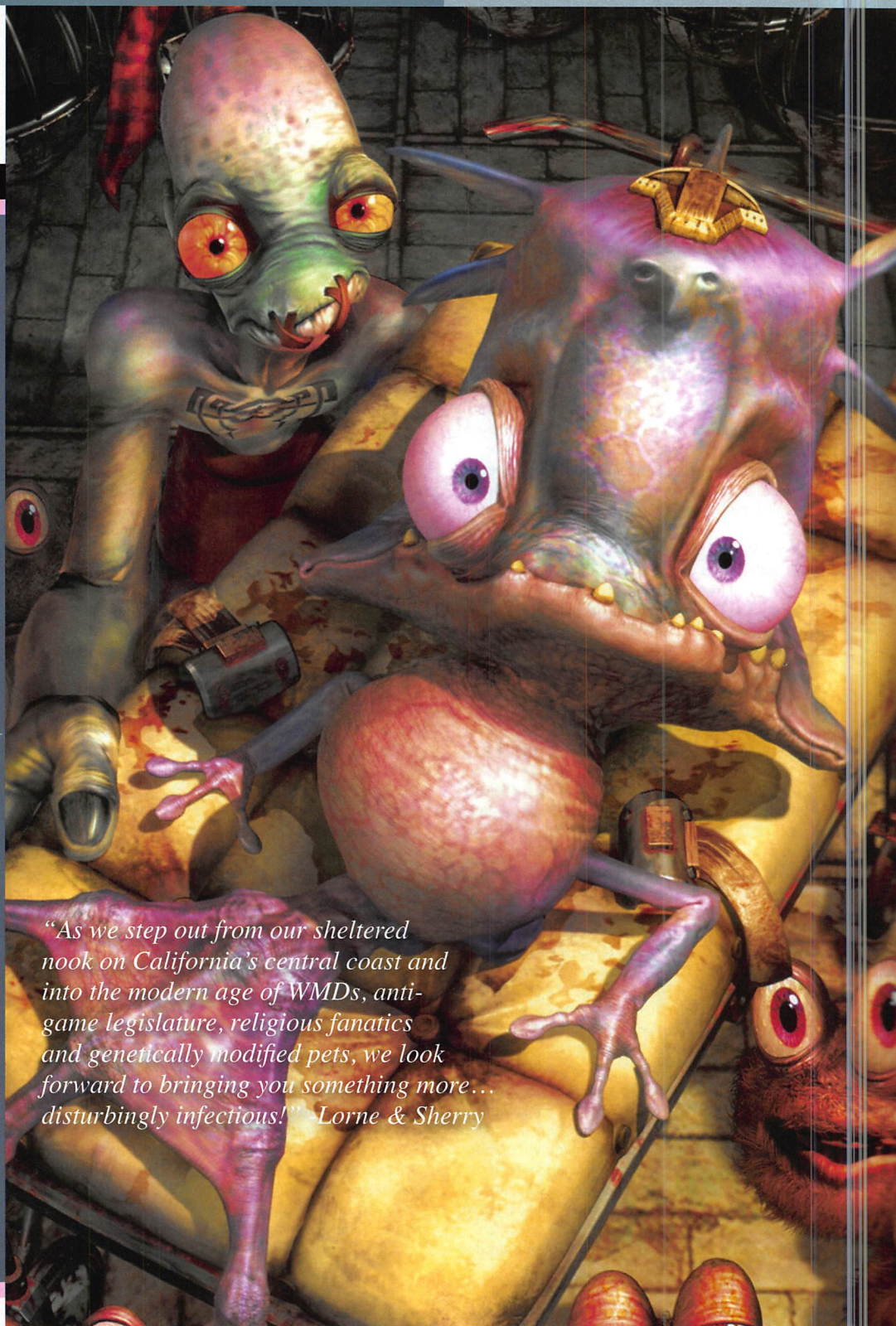
After years of bringing gamers unique, innovative, magical experiences, Oddworld has ceased developing video games in the wake of a changing industry that no longer caters to unique, innovative, magical experiences unless they're backed by a wheelbarrow of cash. That said, if ever a game should have sold a million-plus copies, it was Oddworld: Stranger's Wrath, and it pains us that scores more people stepped up for far lesser, better marketed titles in the passing months. Originally planned as a fully supported Xbox first-party title, Microsoft's choice to opt out led to the title moving over to EA, who proceeded to brand it a "shooter" and advertise and market it in a manner we consider shameful given their retail prowess. We can't help but wonder if Oddworld's choice to not strip the game for release on PS2 might have had something to do with it... Regardless, it's now the last title from one of the most creatively and cinematically gifted studios in gaming history, so...after a moment of silence, go find it. Farewell Abe, Munch and Stranger; we hope to meet again under better circumstances.

And to Lorne Lanning, Sherry McKenna and crew: thank you for the countless hours of wonder, group chanting, the little freak in the squeaky wheelchair, and a Stranger we'll never forget. Some parting words from Oddworld:

"For the Oddworld fans... It has always been our pursuit to birth innovative and captivating experiences for you to enjoy. Along the way, we've been incredibly fortunate to have worked with so many programmers, artists, designers, musicians, as well as the staff that had dedicated their time and energy to the administrative end of things so that the rest of us goofballs could stay focused on the productions. We're proud of what we've been able to achieve and all of those that have helped us achieve it.

"While we will not be managing the internal game development studio as we move forward, it does not mean that you will cease to see a continued focus in bringing our distinctively deranged sensibilities to the world. It's a fascinating time for new stories, heroes and adventurous experiences to be born, and it's time for us to take the bull by the horns.

"We're forever grateful for all the years of support and inspiration that you've given us through your emails, fan letters, artwork, crazy pranks and suspect stories of how Oddworld affected your lives. As we step out from our sheltered nook on California's central coast and into the modern age of WMDs, anti-game legislature, religious fanatics and genetically modified pets, we look forward to bringing you something more...disturbingly infectious!" -Lorne & Sherry



"As we step out from our sheltered nook on California's central coast and into the modern age of WMDs, anti-game legislature, religious fanatics and genetically modified pets, we look forward to bringing you something more...disturbingly infectious!" -Lorne & Sherry

Three's company

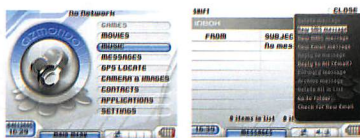
Gizmondo sets its sights on E3

That little gizmo in the back of everyone's (who's heard of it) mind is about to open its own can of personal whoop-ass at this year's E3 via a multi-million dollar pavillion positioned next to Microsoft with 4500 square feet of floor space featuring new games, new technology and "A-list" celebrities (here's to hoping they don't consider Vern Troyer A-list). Gizmondo will also be announcing new partnerships, licenses, future developments and the street date for the U.S. launch of their "multi-entertainment" handheld. So before you pass it off as the talking head from the Jetsons' robo-maid, let's have a look under the hood. The Gizmondo is the first powerful portable gaming device to offer MPEG4 movies, MP3 music, multi-media messaging, web service, a digital camera, Bluetooth multi-player gaming, a GPS chip for location-based services, and a GPRS network link for wide-area network gaming, along with handy tools like a currency exchange-rate converter, alarm clock and calculator. That's one serious widget. Powered by Microsoft Windows CE Advanced real time OS, it also plays great-looking games, riding on a GeForce 3D 4500 Nvidia graphics accelerator powered by a Samsung ARM9 400MHz processor.

So what about those games? Billed in the UK as an "Xbox in your pocket," Gizmondo Studios' Steven Law says, "With the Gizmondo being a completely new entry into the games market, we've been afforded a rare opportunity to start from the ground up, rather than inheriting unsuitable portfolios and tired sequels. These games are just a taste of what's in store further down the line." Adds

Three players in the console wars...three players in the mobile wars. Let the games begin!

managing director Carl Freer: "Expect to see great things from Gizmondo Studios. There are more than 120 skilled and experienced developers working on new titles, and we haven't even begun to push the capabilities of the device yet." Can Florida-based Tiger Telematics take on Sony and Nintendo in the heated next-gen mobile race? Stranger things have happened. *DS, cough.* Most definitely stay tuned.



A sampling of Gizmondo's easy-to-navigate menus.

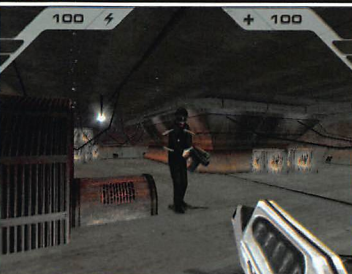
Momma Can I Mow the Lawn Gizmondo Studios



It's games like this that belong on handheld: Remember Paperboy? UK developers still have that sense of wacky fun. In *McMILT*, you play as Kurt, a mischievous teenage kid looking for ways to make a fast buck. In his father's garage, he discovers a prototype vegetation-based fuel converter which his dad designed and built years before... turns out it also makes a brilliant internal combustion fuel. Armed with the family's trusty ride-on mower, he sets out to make his fortune and mayhem ensues.

Speedgun Stadium

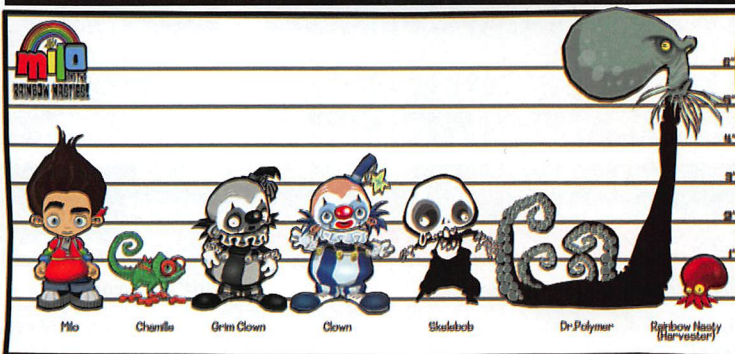
Fathommer



SGS: Speedgun Stadium sets the player in the middle of a violent futuristic TV sport. Armed with a force field and a firearm, the contestants must battle each other in different mazes and arenas in ferocious competitions for highest kill counts. Think *Running Man* meets reality show meets FPS—a futuristic first-person shooter in the vein of *Unreal Tournament*.



Milo and the Rainbow Nasties Gizmondo Studios



If the Gizmondo has an early killer app, this would seem to be it. You play as Milo Sable and his best friend Chamille, the color-shooting chameleon, in a third-person action-adventure world drained of color, using Milo and Chamille's unique ability to paint characters and geometry whilst taking on Dr. Polymer and the Rainbow Nasties in an effort

to bring the grim world back to colorful life. Splat enough of his evil Skelebobs back into the ground, turn hungry zombies back into local inhabitants, blast twisted trees and plants into luscious and beautiful flora and your reward is incredible transformations and access to new areas.

Chicane

Gizmondo Studios



Chicane features Britain's F1 racing superstar Jenson Button battling on the famous streets of San Francisco and other cities with intelligent AI, realistic physics and other exciting, yet-to-be-disclosed features. I don't know about the Xbox in your pocket claim, but Chicane looks nearly comparable to Ridge Racer on PSP.

Fallen Kingdoms

Gizmondo Studios



Journey across the dark and dangerous ruins of Aegion to seek out ancient mysteries where the forces of Undrath, the undead, await you... *Fallen Kingdoms* not only looks great but runs smooth while exhibiting great character animation, spell casting, bosses, textures and varied gameplay that sets it apart from the common action-RPG mold.

database



Virgin Megastore Top Ten

01	Delta Force: Black Hawk Down novalogic / ps2, xb, pc
02	Doom 3 activation / xb
03	Star Wars Episode III lucasarts / ps2, xb
04	Jade Empire microsoft / xb
05	Gran Turismo 4 sony / ps2
06	Splinter Cell : Chaos Theory ubisoft / ps2, xb, gc
07	Area 51 midway / ps2, xb
08	Psychonauts majesco / xb, ps2
09	Midnight Club 3: DUB Edition rockstar / ps2, xb
10	God of War sony / ps2



NPD/TRSTS Top Ten Mar. Game Sales

01	Gran Turismo 4 sony / ps2
02	MVP Baseball 2005 ea / ps2
03	Fight Night Round 2 ea / ps2
04	Devil May Cry 3 capcom / ps2
05	Star Wars: Republic Commando lucasarts / xb
06	God of War sony / ps2
07	Fight Night Round 2 ea / xb
08	Major League Baseball 2K5 take 2 / ps2
09	Brothers in Arms ubisoft / xb
10	MVP Baseball 2005 ea / xb



Your Megastore Beckons!



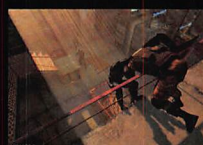
Star Wars Episode III
lucasarts / ps2, xb, pc

The final chapter in the biggest movie franchise ever is upon us. Experience Anakin's turn to the Dark Side in video game form.



Psychonauts
majesco / xb, ps2

Double Fine's breakthrough platformer is spreading o'er the land. Go Raz!



Splinter Cell: Chaos Theory
ubisoft / ps2, xb, gc

The quintessential stealth experience is also one of the most gorgeous games ever.

Staff and reader selections

vote for your most wanted games! database@playmagazine.com

Readers' Most Wanted database@playmagazine.com

01	Legend of Zelda nintendo / gc
02	Final Fantasy XII square enix / ps2
03	Psychonauts majesco / xb
04	Death, Jr. konami/ psp
05	Kingdom Hearts 2 square enix / ps2



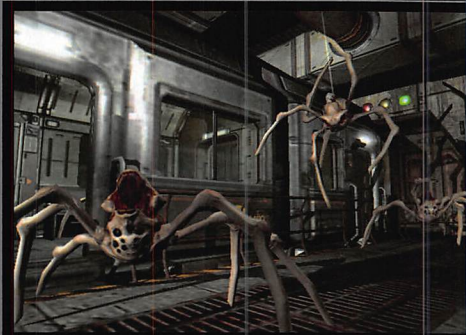
Dave Halverson editor in chief

01	Psychonauts majesco / xb
02	Gunstar Super Heroes sega / gba
03	Jade Empire microsoft / xb
04	Doom 3 activation / xb
05	Rise of the Kasai sony / ps2



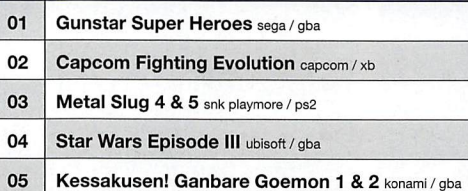
Brady Fiechter executive editor

01	Doom 3 activation / xb
02	Ridge Racer namco / psp
03	Midnight Club 3 rockstar / xb
04	Lumines ubisoft / psp
05	Electroplankton nintendo / ds



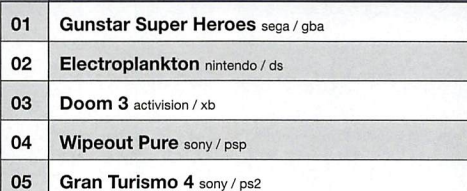
Chris Hoffman some editor

01	Gunstar Super Heroes sega / gba
02	Capcom Fighting Evolution capcom / xb
03	Metal Slug 4 & 5 snk playmore / ps2
04	Star Wars Episode III ubisoft / gba
05	Kessakusen! Ganbare Goemon 1 & 2 konami / gba



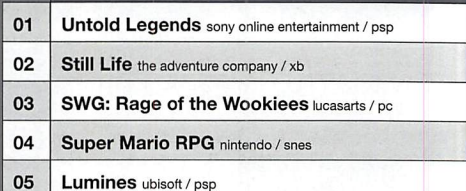
Michael Hobbs art director

01	Gunstar Super Heroes sega / gba
02	Electroplankton nintendo / ds
03	Doom 3 activation / xb
04	Wipeout Pure sony / psp
05	Gran Turismo 4 sony / ps2



Ashley Esqueda associate editor/internet director

01	Untold Legends sony online entertainment / psp
02	Still Life the adventure company / xb
03	SWG: Rage of the Wookiees lucasarts / pc
04	Super Mario RPG nintendo / snes
05	Lumines ubisoft / psp



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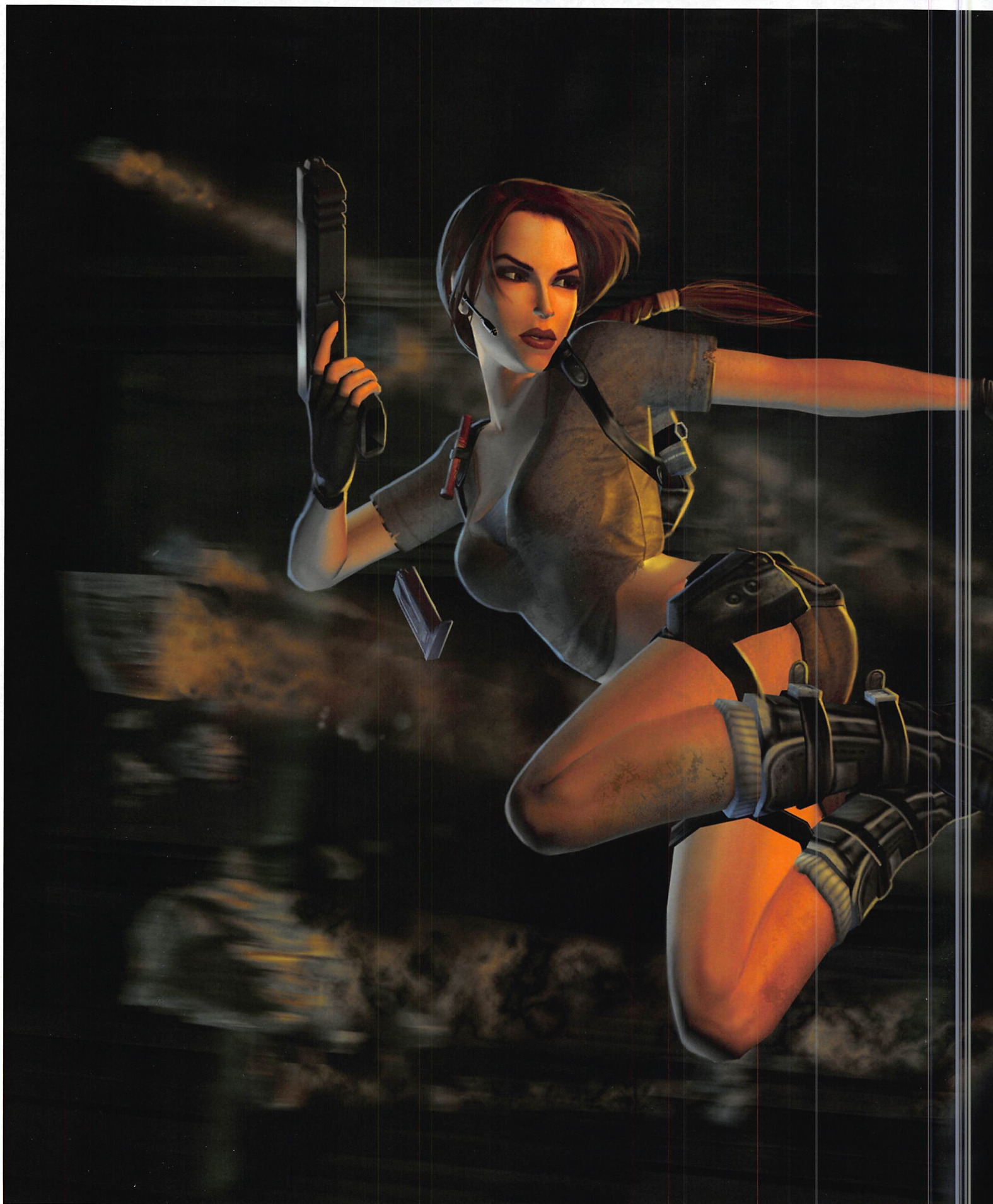
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TOMB RAIDER: LEGEND

RENAISSANCE WOMAN: A LEGEND REBORN
WORDS DAVE HALVERSON

For many of us, Lara Croft was our first... First to trip far-off levers linked to time-released doorways, first to plummet off the summit of a rushing waterfall, first to coalesce with massive environmental puzzles, first to introduce dynamic cinematic overtures that sent chills down our spines, first to spellbind by merely walking...the list goes on and on. She was also 3D gaming's first female superstar, marking the advent of leading ladies across all platforms. So what if she shot a few dogs? Lara Croft was a true vanguard—an institution to 3D gaming as much as Sonic or Mario are to 2D. She made Core—henceforth, creators of critically acclaimed 16- and 32-bit fare such as Chuck Rock and Wonderdog—a household name, and pretty much built the house of Eidos, until finally, after six sequels and an impressive film debut, the walls (for Core at least) came crumbling down.

I was amazed after five formidable sequels in as many years how quickly gamers jumped on the Angel of Darkness dog pile. I began playing the game, keeping close tabs on the boards, which were filled mostly with people beaming

at what a great game it turned out to be (beyond the painful training level) after fearing the worst...until a few fire starters began finding bugs, which sent scads of people looking for bugs, until a lynch mob marched a flawed but highly rewarding game into the flames of internet hell. There was even talk of the game's poor reception affecting the second film, although I can assure you that *Cradle of Life*, unlike *Angel of Darkness*, was and is a train wreck. Jolie freaking punched a shark—saw it coming, cold cocked it and then rode the thing like a porpoise. Suspension of disbelief burst into flames and never smoldered. Anyway, having sold well in excess of two million copies, *Tomb Raider: Angel of Darkness* would become the most successful genuinely disliked game in video game history. But they say everything happens for a reason...

After a brief healing period, the not-so shocking news of Lara's fate emerged. The words "bug" and "Tomb Raider" having appeared in the same sentence prompted Eidos to pluck Lara from her now-bewildered family at Core and move her into the loving embrace of Crystal Dynamics, home of *Soul Reaver*, where an engine that would surely caress her tender loins and a team of

"...A SUPREMELY REINVIGORATED TOMB RAIDER REDUX, BUT STILL EVERY BIT THE GAME WE FELL IN LOVE WITH."



designers and texture artists that know no boundaries would welcome her with open arms. After countless Kains and Soul Reavers, the prospect of resurrecting Lara must have been music to their ears... Scary Gothic *The Omen* theme music, but music nevertheless... Next, in a stroke of pure genius, Eidos enlisted Lara's once-proud papa (Tomb Raider began life with a male lead) Toby Gard as character lead. Toby happened to leave Core, and his claim to fame, just before his femme fatal would become an international phenomenon. (Who knew?) Now, having completed his own epic, the underrated *Galleon*, he would be front and center for her comeback. Reads

like a screenplay doesn't it?

So here we are, fellow fickle Tomb Raider fans, huddled in a mass waiting to either pounce or praise, which is why I begged like a dictator in a deep hole for the first *new* Tomb Raider cover. Lara changed my life once—I despised 3D until I met her—and I've been tight with Core's core, Jeremy and Adrian Smith, for the duration, so I figure I owe Lara and everyone who holds this brand dear an unbiased first in-depth look at the next next-generation Tomb Raider...now, finally, on Xbox. I've always hated that loading bar.

Before we get to the Q&A, having seen Legend in motion, let me preface it by saying



A tug on a glove here...a random pause to stretch there: subtleties that go a long way in the making of a legend.

Gunplay has always been a part of the TR formula; Lara's just learned to take cover.



this is every bit the Tomb Raider we know and love (or knew and once loved depending on the person)—a supremely reinvigorated Tomb Raider redux, but still every bit the game we fell in love with. It's plain to see that Crystal Dynamics has adhered to the game's fundamentals while enhancing every facet of them in the process, having conducted extensive research to get into the fabric of the franchise: consulting with fans, reading every past review (see, this is why we need clones) and playing every game in the series end to end. The result is a game that couldn't be more honed for its most avid fan base, returning Lara to her tomb-raiding roots, intelligent dialogue and graceful athletic prowess, jaunting around ancient realms and unlocking secrets of the past. She now dons an intricately animated visage with reactive roving eyes and realistic expressions, new abilities via the magnetic grappling tool, frag grenades, a personal light and assorted communication devices, new signature moves including a Strider-like slide, and slightly altered proportions resulting in a slinkier, sexier silhouette. The new walk alone is mesmerizing—all those extra polys (Legend's is the most detailed Lara yet) definitely show—and she's had a much-needed breast reduction and belly button relocation.

Fully aware, however, that hips and thighs can only take a game so far, Crystal has done the most work on the gameplay,

molding the environments like a character in the game—"living" architecture meant to marry character and environ like never before as Lara's dynamic animation allows for continuous motion negotiating obstacles without breaking stride, along with (and this is exciting) interacting dynamically with any surface. If you frequent my reviews, then you already know how vital I believe this to be, but few studios are able to implement it. Legend will never jar you from the reality of the game as so many of today's games do. The physics, water and fire systems are also bleeding-edge, resulting in the most immersive Tomb Raider (or perhaps any game for that matter) environments to date...and all this from the studio that brought us Soul Reaver, so expect textures from the gods. Tomb Raider: Legend isn't going to be as good as Lara's best; it's going to be better.

Tomb Raider: Legend

PlayStation 2, Xbox, PC

Point of Interest

Lara Croft has appeared on over 80 magazine and newspaper covers around the world (and growing), is part of Time Magazine's "50 Cyber Elite" and was nominated as one of their "Top 20 Most Influential Figures of the 20th Century."

Developer: Crystal Dynamics Publisher: Eidos

Online: TBA Available: Winter



"SHE NOW DONS AN INTRICATELY ANIMATED VISAGE WITH REACTIVE ROVING EYES AND REALISTIC EXPRESSIONS..."

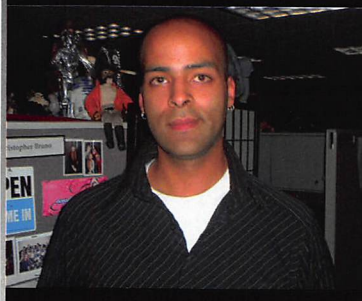
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TOMB RAIDER:
LEGEND

INTERVIEWS

Lara's new family:
the team at Crystal
Dynamics.

MORGAN GRAY PRODUCER



"TAKING LARA TO EXOTIC LOCATIONS WITH DRAMATIC VISTAS AND BIG REVEALS IS AT THE HEART OF THE FRANCHISE."

play: Where does Legend fall? Is it post AoD in the game universe? Has any of the film mythos leaked over?

Morgan Gray: Legend continues the adventures of Lara Croft. It is not a prequel of any kind, nor does it continue any of the story threads found in previous installments. However, it should be said that many aspects of Lara's history are dealt with directly during the course of the game. Some elements seen in the Tomb Raider films will be present, but Legend is a whole new adventure.

Is Legend running on a modified version of the Soul Reaver engine or something entirely new?

Yes, Legend is being constructed on an upgraded version of the technology we used during Soul Reaver's development. Serious aspects of the engine have been built from the ground up to achieve our creative goals on the title. Certainly in regards to animation and camera and player control we have invested a significant amount of time and energy towards pushing the bar forward.

Is the new game based more in reality/real world situations or mythology?

Lara's world is a bit more fantastic than the real one (as far as we know), but grounded in current reality. Expect to see elements of the fantastic—both known mythology and new mysteries—as Lara explores the outer boundaries and inner reaches of the modern world.

So will Lara be facing off against massive behemoths and assorted

creatures? You guys certainly know a thing or two about otherworldly creatures. Will the enemy be more aggressive or smart this time around? Are you doing much in the way of AI? We do have a few big surprises in terms of foes to fight. Our AI system is actually quite robust. They have multiple ways of detecting Lara, and will respond to the ever-changing combat situation in intelligent ways. Such as moving to flank her when she is pinned down, dodging grenades, and calling for backup.

You played through every Tomb Raider—a noble gesture. Any games in particular strike you as the standouts?

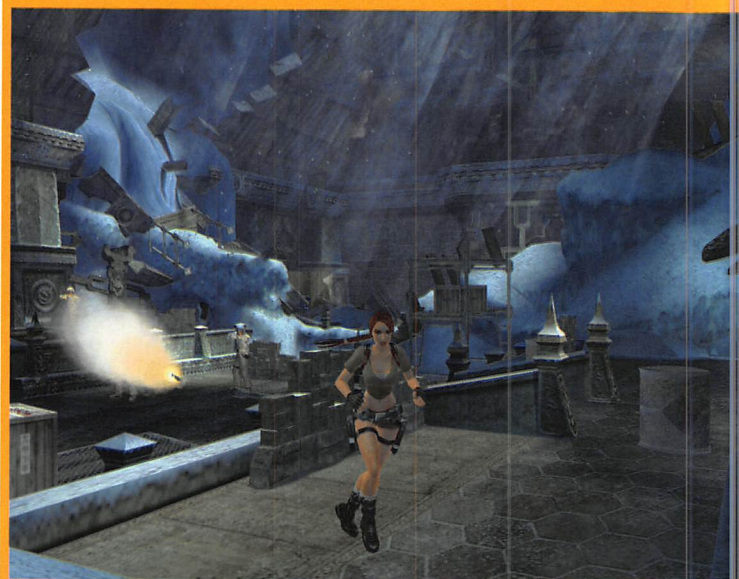
Without a doubt, the first title is my favorite. The experience was fresh; nothing else was like it at the time. Who could forget the memorable moments like being chased by animals, to the T-Rex, the Atlantean doppelganger puzzle room. Fantastic stuff!

Did you end up making Legend similar to the early games or the latter, more stealthy, Bond type?

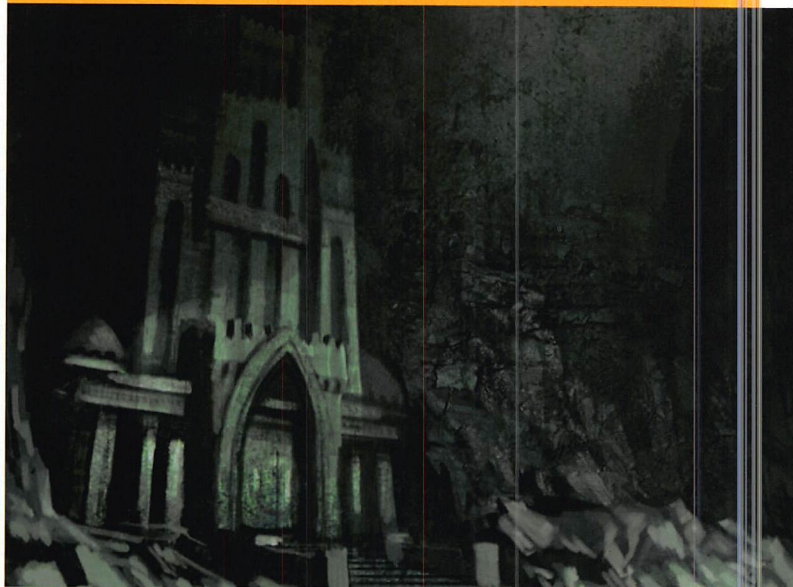
We are certainly looking at the early games as our main force of inspiration. There was something awe-inspiring about the early games with their strong focus on navigation and exploration, not just run-and-gun gameplay. Our combat gameplay certainly leaves room for cover and surprise-based tactics; it is much faster paced and visceral, involving numerous jumps, ducks, slides and rolls. We'll leave the skulking around hallways for the other guys.

The environments in the older Tomb

"YOU NO LONGER NEED TO BE PERFECTLY LINED UP TO GET HER TO GRAB ONTO A SURFACE..."



We'll have to wait and see how Lara manages to dodge speeding missiles...



Raiders were like characters in the game. What made TR so wonderful early on was the sense of wonder and expanse, exploring and unlocking secrets among massive relics and hallowed places. Any TR fan will tell you that first jump off the waterfall stayed with them forever. Are you creating a game filled with more of those moments?

Absolutely! This is one of the cornerstones of our level design goals. Taking Lara to exotic locations with dramatic vistas and big reveals is at the heart of the franchise. It's those special standout gems that take the experience to the next level.

When you say interact dynamically with any surface, does that mean Lara will



come to rest on surfaces realistically? (If so, I love you). In what other ways, does she gel with her surroundings?

Yes! We have done a great deal of work to insure that not only is she grounded to the environment in realistic ways, but that controlling her to move throughout the environment is as responsive and realistic as possible. You no longer need to be perfectly lined up to get her to grab onto a surface, and she is smart enough not to fall off ledges if you take a false step.

AoD wasn't a bad game, just a (supposedly) buggy one with lots of loading and a weak final boss...I quite liked it otherwise. The game had some great moments and fine detail. Still, buggy and Tomb Raider should have never appeared in the same sentence. Is this more of a modernization, enhancement or total overhaul?

I agree that the words "buggy" and "Tomb Raider" should never be uttered together. Tomb Raider: Legend is more of an overhaul in terms of taking the franchise to the next level. Previous titles have made small steps towards improving on the gameplay promises of the franchise. We have boiled down

control, camera, combat, gear) and invested considerable effort towards creating a modern gameplay experience worthy of the franchise.

Lara rides! The motorcycle bits look awesome. Does she ride it often in the game? Are you infusing the game with many vehicles?

There are several key moments where Lara will need to get on the bike. Although there

So finally...Xbox: Lara will undoubtedly thrive with her new (finally!) multi-platform address. What are you doing specifically to take advantage of the Xbox's specs? Will it simply load quicker and run smoother or are there differences in poly counts, textures, water, etc.?

We're doing a full texture pass specifically for the Xbox version and yes, the frame rate and load times will be faster on the

"WE HAVE BOILED DOWN THE FOUNDATIONAL COMPONENTS (MOVEMENT, CONTROL, CAMERA, COMBAT, GEAR) AND INVESTED CONSIDERABLE EFFORT TOWARDS CREATING A MODERN GAMEPLAY EXPERIENCE WORTHY OF THE FRANCHISE."

is a smattering of other vehicles in the game, it goes without saying that Lara's motorcycle is the prominent ride.

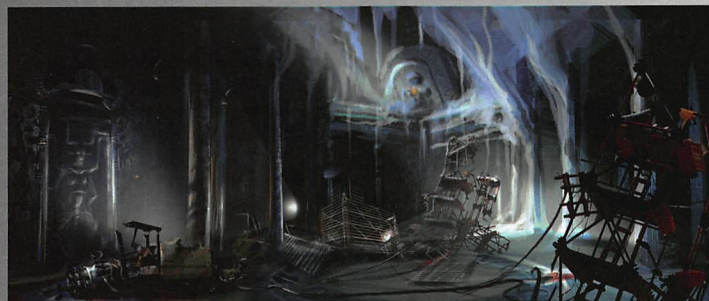
We noticed some slow-motion as well. Is there a time manipulation element in the game?

We have been exploring time-alteration, dramatic camera angles and other visual devices that help to serve our gameplay goals and provide a visually stunning experience. It's a tad too early to talk about the specifics just yet.

Xbox version. There will definitely be widescreen support for the Xbox version and we're looking into some of the Xbox specific features such as soundtrack support.

Will you be handling the story in traditional manner via real-time or CG cutscenes or infusing the levels with real-time bits of story in a more cinematic vein?

Players will live out the story of Legend throughout the play experience, from



real-time conversation and action during gameplay to carefully integrated in-engine cinematics.

The game footage depicts new shooting elements (turrets are always a blast) as well as more of that magic Tomb Raider platforming we miss so much, including some interesting new jump angles and rope play. Is the game balanced evenly between gunplay and adventure/platforming or more the old Indy Jones-type magic?

We are balancing the game primarily around movement and adventure/platforming mixed with combat. Although magic has its place in the Tomb Raider universe, it's not really Lara's personal cup of tea.

Have you added any melee/disarming maneuvers?

Yes. We're also developing linked combat combo moves that will make the most out of both Lara's athletic abilities and her signature guns.

What about pick-ups and inventory...

White box, red cross? Has the inventory system undergone any changes? I know she has some great new gadgets!

Lara has a number of gadgets that help her get down to business. Obviously there is her weapon arsenal, complete with her signature pistols. We have a brand-new item called the grappling hook that takes advantage of our physics systems. Lara can now pull and drag objects (and herself) around the environments in the game. This has opened the door to all sorts of new puzzle design and player path options. We'll be talking more about Lara's new tools a little further down the road.

Will you be re-tooling Legend for play on Xbox 360? And if so, would we see drastic changes in everything from the architecture to the models? It would almost be a new game on this skeleton, wouldn't it?

We're not too ready to talk about this bit yet!

MORE TRL >>>

TOMB RAIDER:
LEGEND

INTERVIEWS



TOBY GARD LEAD CHARACTER DESIGNER



"LARA'S PERSONA HAS NOT REALLY CHANGED, AT LEAST NOT FOR ME. I'M HOPING THIS GAME WILL LET PEOPLE GET A CLEARER LOOK AT WHO LARA REALLY IS..."

play: How ironic is this? You left Core soon after creating Lara, only to return to her side for the resurgence. Had you felt that prior to Crystal landing the developer role after Core had lost their way with her?

Toby Gard: Yes, I think so.

So, the new Lara...smaller breasts (hopefully gently animated), a bit less exaggerated and obviously painstakingly modeled and animated. How much did you toil over this latest iteration?

It was a collaborative effort to reach the final new look. We went through plenty of different versions (especially for the face) before reaching the new look. It was a long, arduous process, since we were keen to update her without alienating her fans, and that is a tough tightrope to walk.

Well, she looks incredible. The walking animation is truly beautiful and the expression in her face and roving eyes are exquisite. She appears more feminine and mysterious. Bravo.

Cool! I'm glad you like it.

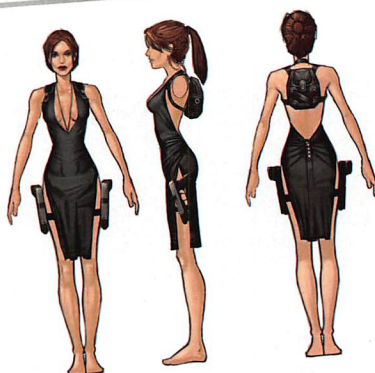
Does she step incrementally? Turn, quick turn and jump the same? In the gameplay footage, she seems true to her roots in terms of animation, but looks looser and more in tune with the environments. Has her control been

tweaked or refined in any way?

Tomb Raider: Legend's Lara control system is not like old TR controls or Angel of Darkness controls at all. With this game, Crystal Dynamics started from scratch building the game from the ground up. The goal is to create a very responsive, fluid control system but still have Lara animating in a solid and believable way, which is, again, a tough line to walk.

We noticed a cool Strider-like slide move along with some new platforming elements. Does Lara have quite a few new tricks up her...er, no sleeves?

Yes, she has some very neat tricks that you will no doubt hear about soon.



"LEGEND'S LARA CONTROL SYSTEM IS NOT LIKE OLD TR CONTROLS OR ANGEL OF DARKNESS CONTROLS AT ALL."



Legend vs. Aod
Extreme Makeover
Tomb Raider Edi-
tion: Legs, breasts,
mid-drift, face—all
new and improved.

The gypsy eyes are beautiful. Does the new look tie into any changes in Lara's demeanor/persona?

Lara's persona has not really changed, at least not for me. I'm hoping this game will let people get a clearer look at who Lara really is, and so from my point of view, that just means going back to who she started as.

Are you working the hair the same way, sticking to the flowing ponytail?

Yes, a ponytail rather than a braid. You will see that soon, I think.

How about wardrobe? Will we see many costume changes? We've noticed three already...

There are quite a few. We want Lara's clothing to demonstrate the fact that she is

modern, cool and, above all, fashionable.

What are the differences between the PS2 Lara model and the Xbox Lara model?

About 5000 polygons and double the textures.

So, is Crystal your permanent home, or will you continue with Confounding Factor and consulting on Lara as new titles surface?

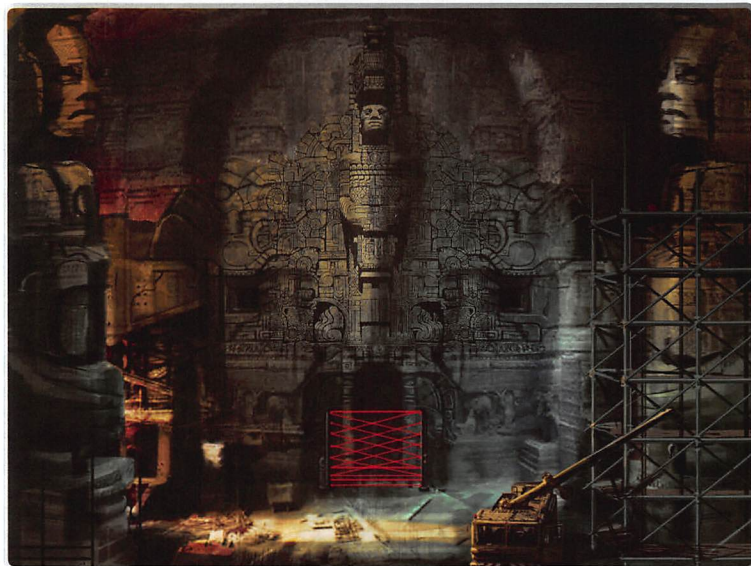
I'd like to see where Lara goes next; I think Tomb Raider: Legend is like a new beginning for her and the possibilities are actually quite exciting.

You have to be thinking about where you'll take her on Xbox 360 and beyond... Give us a glimpse?

Ah, now that's information we're not yet ready to divulge.



Lara pulls a gondola into jumping range with her new grappling tool.



TROELS BRUN FOLMANN **COMPOSER**

"WE HAVE CREATED A HIGHLY FLEXIBLE MUSIC SYSTEM, WHICH ALLOWS THE MUSIC TO ADAPT TO PLAYER ACTIONS AND CHANGES IN THE GAME ENVIRONMENT."



play: Will the music be constant or fade in and out as is customary? If so, will it be more frequent?

Troels Brun Folmann: The music is scored individually for all the levels, events and main characters in the game. We have created a highly flexible music system, which allows the music to adapt to player actions and changes in the game environment. The player will feel the soundtrack constantly corresponds to his or her choices in the game.

Speaking of the music, it's always managed to send chills down our spines. Will you adhere to the classical arrangements formula or mix it up a bit

more?

We have extremely high demands for the soundtrack for Tomb Raider: Legend. First of all, we want to follow the music tradition from the old games. But we also want to add a new dimension to the soundtrack by combining epic classical orchestration, symphonic choirs and a variety of electronica resources. The game takes place in a variety of destinations and we want the music to complement the different environments and atmospheres. The soundtrack for Tomb Raider: Legend is over 120 minutes long.

LARA RETROSPECTIVE >>>



THE CHRONICLES OF LARA

A RETROSPECTIVE

1996: 3D gaming was still a babe in the woods (and us chasing it with pitchforks and torches), and the closest thing we had to a female lead was El Viento, until small but renowned UK developer Core Design, namely Jeremy and Adrian Smith, practically on a dare, decided to roll the dice on a big (pointy) breasted heroine named Lara Cruz (who would later undergo a name change to become Lady Croft) and the rest, as they say, is her-story.

1996

TOMB RAIDER

The birth of a legend

Systems: PlayStation, Saturn, PC



It all began in Peru when Jacqueline Natla sent Lara in search of an ancient artifact, the Scion, and (being evil, of course) dispatched a squad of goons to talk like fools, spoil her fun and ultimately grab the loot for her own devices. Lara's rigid tomb raiding controls were born unto a world that, for the most part, adapted, intrigued by the innovative environmental puzzles, underwater gameplay, bone-chilling ambient score and integrated story. At the very least, Tomb Raider changed adventure gaming forever and set in motion gaming's fascination with ample-breasted leading ladies.

1997

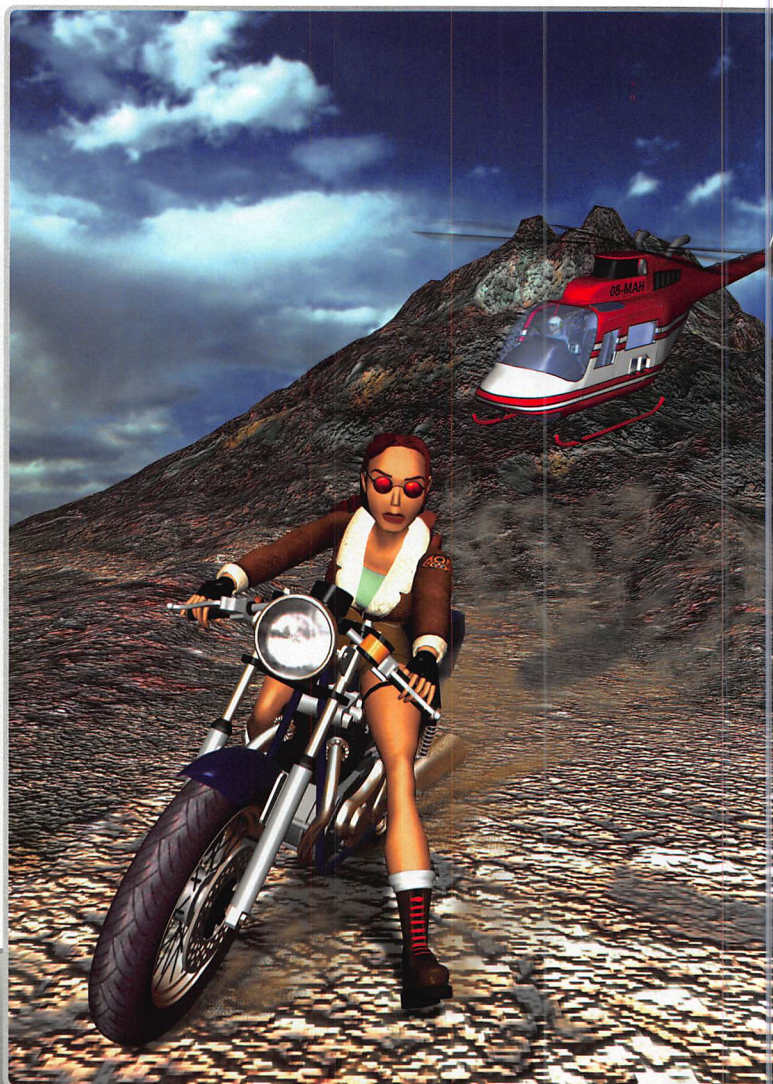
TOMB RAIDER 2

More of the same...only better

Systems: PlayStation, Saturn, PC



For her second adventure, Lara went in search of the Dagger of Xian—which, when thrust into one's heart, was said to produce the power of an ancient dragon. Unfortunately for her, so did Marco Bartolli and his Fiamma Nera cult. Lara drove a boat through the canals of Venice, donned an M16, shotgun and



harpoon, and even invited us over for in-home training at Croft Manor, which also became a level in the game... Could this be the fateful encounter that lead to her home invasion in the first film? Come to think of it, TR2 also had Lara fending off sharks... Conclusive proof the movie producers owned at least one game in the series. As sequels go, TR2 built on everything the first game established and was very well received. Tomb Raider was a bona fide franchise, kicking the Eidos marketing machine into high gear.



"TLR BROUGHT US BACK TO THOSE
CLAUSTROPHOBIC EARLY DAYS OF TOMB
RAIDING..."

1999

TOMB RAIDER: THE LAST REVELATION

The pivotal game in the franchise

Systems: PlayStation, Dreamcast, PC

Just when everyone thought Core's ship might run aground, along comes The Last Revelation. Admittedly tiring—evident in the fact that they're contemplating her death—Core delivers a stunning fourth game in the series. TLR sees a return to the game's adventuring roots and keeps Lara in one place, Egypt, for the duration, going after the Seth (pronounced Set), which unfortunately releases an evil deity bent on world destruction. TLR brought us back to those claustrophobic early days of Tomb Raiding and at the same time once again (this time significantly) raised the bar in terms

of graphics. I can recall at that year's E3 how proud Jeremy and Adrian Smith were of their lighting and water effects, and they had every reason. They also found their center in terms of continuity by adopting Metroid-style lateral movement: finding an item in one area to open another. The game also introduces us to Lara's mentor, Von Croy, and young Lara, as he trains her and is ultimately buried alive, marking the beginning of Tomb Raider's longest running theme, as it would span the next two games (even though Lara is presumed dead). Huge success, first time on Dreamcast, and all is very well in Lara land.

1998

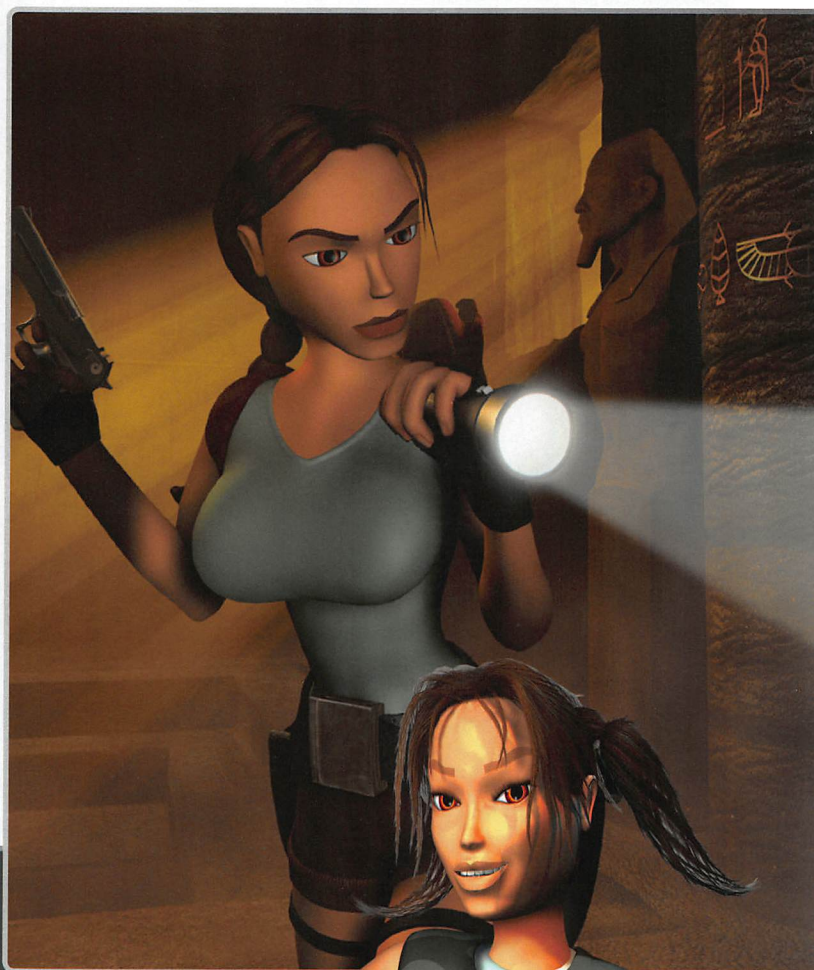
TOMB RAIDER III: THE ADVENTURES OF LARA CROFT

Chinks in the armor

Systems: PlayStation 2, PC



Disturbing trend alert: with three sequels in as many years, the wheels were bound to at least begin to loosen, and they finally do. Tomb Raider III features a ridiculous plot and find-the-key, open-the-door scenarios as Lara goes in search of comet fragments that somehow end up embedded in India, Easter Island, London and the Nevada desert. While III enjoys a significant leap in graphics, the non-linear gameplay model is flawed as Core decides to pair sudden-death scenarios with hard-to-navigate backtracking and the old save crystals formula, resulting in infuriating do-overs among, by far, the series' most difficult puzzles. The ability to visit any level at any time breaks continuity and the game becomes like a big TR Rubik's Cube. TR III is not so well received but is, of course, a huge success.



MORE RETROSPECTIVE --->



THE CHRONICLES OF LARA

A RETROSPECTIVE



"...THE SERIES' MOST VARIED
INSTALLMENT—INCLUDING STINTS
IN ROME, A SUBMARINE, A GHOST
STORY AS YOUNG LARA..."

2000

TOMB RAIDER CHRONICLES

Back on solid ground

Systems: PlayStation, Dreamcast, PC

Tomb Raider Chronicles is played out as four stodgy old men/former clients, including Von Croy, gather to recap their brushes with the late great Lara Croft, resulting in four distinctly different vignettes—and therefore the series' most varied

installment—including stints in Rome, a submarine, a ghost story as young Lara, and what would become known as the best level in the series to date, if not the saving grace of the game: the final approach to Von Croy's tower, where Core deftly added stealth to the mix. The game features vast weaponry, a return to epic bosses, pole swinging, a slightly hackneyed search function and, unfortunately so for some, a lot less vintage exploration, as the series veers into a more commando-style direction. Chronicles is linear, relatively short, and has a few collision snafus, but Lara is alive and...headed for PS2...

play magazine's Tomb Raider

BEST 5

1. Tomb Raider
2. Tomb Raider: The Last Revelation
3. Tomb Raider 2
4. Tomb Raider: Angel of Darkness
5. Tomb Raider Chronicles



2003

TOMB RAIDER: ANGEL OF DARKNESS

The skewering of a legend: mutiny on the bosom

Systems: PlayStation 2, PC

After nearly a decade of churning out sequels, one after the other, burning through staffing problems, the rigors of constant milestones, and life as multi-millionaires with no time to stop and smell even one flower, Jeremy and Adrian Smith decide it's time to give Lara and themselves a much needed rest. So, while they lay the foundation for the next ambitious chapter in the chronicles of Lara and help produce the feature film, they produce Jeremy's long-lost pet project Herdy Gerdy, arguably the most ambitious PS2 game of its time. Ultimately, the game is, as expected, a masterpiece of animation (it's a living 3D cartoon) and innovative gameplay, however, mauled by dim critics, due to a few minor insignificant issues, the game falls short of expectations, placing an even larger target on Core Design's now weary façade. After missing several imposed deadlines, for fiscal reasons Angel of Darkness is hurried through the most crucial stage of development and released with concentrated moments of slowdown, a myriad of glitches certain people found and others didn't almost as if two versions were distributed (I encountered exactly zero) and a forgettable climax. The fact that Laura interacted with other characters, had new climbing, melee and stealth capabilities, looked absolutely incredible and was riding on a completely revamped control scheme was pretty much overlooked. The bandwagon had a V8 under the hood and fire-breathing headers. For all of its great story and cinemas, fine detail and memorable new environments (so the strength-building was a little hokey), Angel of Darkness (and with it Core) was beaten like a deer hunter at a PETA convention, and Core's long, strange journey with Lara Croft came to an abrupt, debilitating halt. Soon after, the second film, which genuinely sucked, bombed too.

"...I HAVEN'T BEEN THIS EXCITED ABOUT THE FRANCHISE SINCE I ESCAPED THE JAWS OF THE T-REX BACK IN 1996..."



IN CONCLUSION...

It's funny how the end came just as Core was getting their second wind, convinced they had released the game of their careers, ready to further polish their magnum opus for the road ahead, but I can't help but wonder if it wasn't for the best. Looking at Tomb

Raider: Legend in motion, I haven't been this excited about the franchise since I escaped the jaws of the T-Rex back in 1996, and I can't think of a finer studio than Crystal Dynamics to reshape the future for Lara Croft. Plus, after seven games in nine years...it was time.

In a perfect world, Core Design (now Circle Studios) would have picked up where they left off and went back to making amazing character action games and shooters. Their new

project, Capcom's Without Warning, has "me too" written all over it, although I'm not giving up on them just yet. In the meantime, to Core Design, I say thank you for Chuck and Son, Bubba 'n' Stix, Skeleton Krew, Soulstar, and especially Herdy Gerdy and Wonderdog (curses for never making a sequel though). To Crystal Dynamics: treat her well, and finally, to Eidos, after you apologize to mature gamers the world over for canceling Fear Effect: Inferno (okay, so, it's on life support), consider tightening up Angel of Darkness and releasing it sans loading bars on Xbox. Let people play the game as it was meant to be so I can say I had my day in court, and you can make it an even three million (at least). Whatever you do, sell no game before its time. Okay, now I'm ready for the next adventure.

END

Kingdom Hearts II

New wonders await for Sora and friends

The original Kingdom Hearts was a journey unlike any other—one that merged the magic of Disney with the majesty of Final Fantasy, combined happy, bright, beautiful worlds with a tale of melancholy and loss, and featured a story that could penetrate the heart of any gamer of any age. For more than two years, gamers have waited patiently for the console sequel, and while Square Enix isn't ready to reveal everything just yet, the enticing bits they've unveiled so far are looking every bit as impressive as one would expect.

Kingdom Hearts II picks up one year after Kingdom Hearts: Chain of Memories ended, and in one of that game's locales: Twilight Town, city of perpetual dusk. Sora, Donald and Goofy, their memories now restored, are still searching for their friends and King Mickey, and the threats of the Heartless and the Organization still loom. Much like its predecessor, the game promises to be an action-RPG of the highest caliber, offering real-time combat and spell casting set within Disney cartoon worlds come to life. Among the worlds Square Enix has revealed so far: ancient China, where Sora will join up with the female warrior Mulan to battle the Hun army (as well as imposing new Heartless monsters) and an encore visit to Hercules' world of Greek mythology, which will now go beyond the Coliseum and into the Underworld itself. It's here where Sora and company team up with a younger version of Final Fantasy X's Auron to battle Hades.

Other worlds and characters have yet to be unveiled, and other mysteries remain.

Footage of an enigmatic blond-haired boy (previously seen in Chain of Memories) indicates a new character who plays an important role in the story. And what are King Mickey and Riku up to? One thing we do know is that KHII will have monumental production values, boasting the returning voice talent of Haley Joel Osment as Sora and James Woods as Hades, while Ming-Na will be reprising her role as Mulan. Square Enix still hasn't committed to a release date for Kingdom Hearts II, but all evidence indicates that the game will be worth the wait. Chris Hoffman

Kingdom Hearts II

PlayStation 2

Point of Interest

A new Drive Meter will let Sora fuse with a partner character in battle, granting him new abilities.

Developer: Square Enix Publisher: Square Enix

Available: TBA Online: None

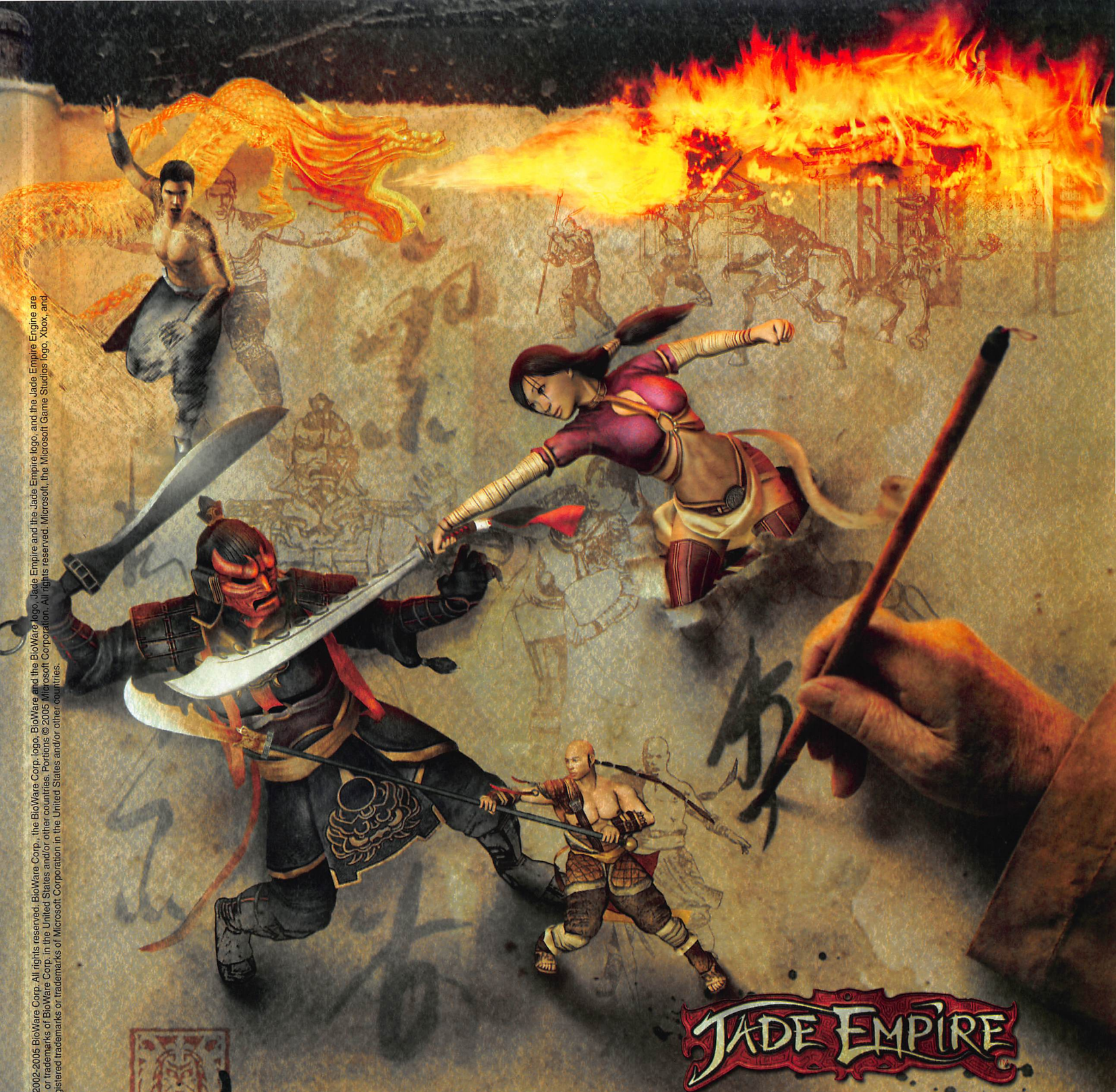


"...the enticing bits they've unveiled so far are looking every bit as impressive as one would expect."

In Mulan's world, this Heartless boss takes the form of a Chinese dragon.



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proves himself to be immortal.



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Violence
Blood and Gore

MAGNA CARTA

CRIMSON STIGMATA

An RPG worth getting excited about, from Korea with love

For how exalted a run the PS2 is having—and it's Earth-shattering by gaming calculations—there have been precious few truly epic role-playing games along the way. Beyond Final Fantasy X and X-2 (the pinnacle), a pair of Xenosagas, Shadow Hearts, and Shin Megami Tensei: Digital Devil Saga and Nocturne, there have been relatively few great RPGs compared to the other big-draw genres. Magna Carta is such an RPG, with the kind of innovative systems and gameplay, story and characters that can incite a movement.

Originally released on PC in Korea back in 2001, the PS2 version is an all-new original game with upgraded systems and graphics strong enough to back up some of the finest hand-drawn character assets of this or any other generation. Like the ill-fated The Crusaders: Kingdom Under Fire for Xbox, Magna Carta possesses that very special Korean flair indicative of a development community free of stifling parameters, where designers are able to cultivate every facet of their creations. Magna Carta looks and feels different in a most intriguing way. Everything, from the stunning CG, historical background and lore to the progressive nature of the game, looks and feels unconventional, which,



部下からの情報によりますと、近いうちに
ガルートで大祈願祭が行われるようです。

Aside from
Square Enix, no
one does character
design like
Kim Hyung-Tae.



ヤソンを信じるなど言っただろう。
なのにどうして！



"...MAGNA CARTA POSSESSES THAT VERY SPECIAL KOREAN FLAIR INDICATIVE OF A DEVELOPMENT COMMUNITY FREE OF STIFLING PARAMETERS..."



as dry as turn-based RPGs have become (outside of the Atlus and Square-Enix pride) is really saying something.

A large part of the attraction is due to the regional map and battle systems. Traversing the terrain with haste, you run the risk of getting caught in a "Back Attack"—which, in this game's case, can be devastating—while moving slower with sword drawn you can almost always get the drop on veiled monsters. Once engaged, the semi-real time/rhythmic command system elicits a trio of button presses on a circular grid, which determines the power of your magic (or Yupa) and strikes. The more accurate the timing, the more lethal the blow, and consecutive strikes fill the Trinity Drive, leading up to chain, or "Crazy," attacks that require great timing but inflict serious damage. Positioning is also crucial, as is team leadership (which is linked to the game's friendship feature) and reflex, as your and the enemies' gauges feed in from opposite directions. Combined with techniques used to preempt, counter and

defend, this is one seriously nuanced (and I can attest, highly addictive) battle system.

The story, which throws Calintz, Commander of the Tears of Blood, and Rith, a beautiful witch suffering from amnesia, together, seems incredible, but I don't dare attempt to unscramble the literal Korean translation in fear of misinterpreting gems like "...Hatred results from misunderstanding and will eventually make people to lose their rationality and they will not be able to see obvious facts. This is the theme of this game." I mean no disrespect, that's just plain funny. I'm officially on the Magna Carta bandwagon.

Dave Halverson

Magna Carta: Crimson Stigmata

PlayStation 2

Point of Interest

Magna Carta's character designs are by the incredible and highly renowned illustrator Kim Hyung-tae.

Developer: Softmax Co., Ltd. Publisher: Atlus

Online: None Available: Q4



Castlevania

Curse of Darkness

The Devils made him do it

Now that we've finally gotten our hands on Castlevania: Curse of Darkness, it's easy to see why producer Koji Igarashi has described the latest console Castlevania's motif as "beat 'em up with a partner." To be specific, the partner is a creature called an Innocent Devil—many different types of which will join protagonist Hector on his quest—and they will factor in to almost every aspect of Castlevania's gameplay.

For starters, Innocent Devils will play an integral role in combat. When the Innocent Devils are in Auto mode (commands are issued quickly and easily with a press of the D-pad), they battle enemies on their own while Hector is unleashing various combos complete with player-initiated finishing hits, such as a whirlwind attack or a rapid multi-hit pummel. Switch the Devils to Support mode, however, and they conserve their attacks for use as the combo ender, like the stone golem splashing down on foes from above.

Innocent Devils also take on the role of sub-weapons in Curse of Darkness. Instead of the traditional axe or holy water, each Devil has innate abilities the player can unleash (for a few heart points, of course), such as the bird-type Devil

"...the partner is a creature called an Innocent Devil... and they will factor in to almost every aspect of Castlevania's gameplay."

bombarding from above with the Bone Bomb or releasing a wicked piercing attack with the Bone Shot. Most likely, these attacks will evolve as the Devils level up through combat. In addition, Innocent Devils take the place of the relics that previously augmented the hero's abilities. Crossing a large gap, for example, will require the bird's glide power, and avoiding a powerful screen-filling attack will require the player to set the golem to Self Defense mode, where his size proves useful as a shield. The idea is for the player to figure out what skills each Devil is best at and when to use them.

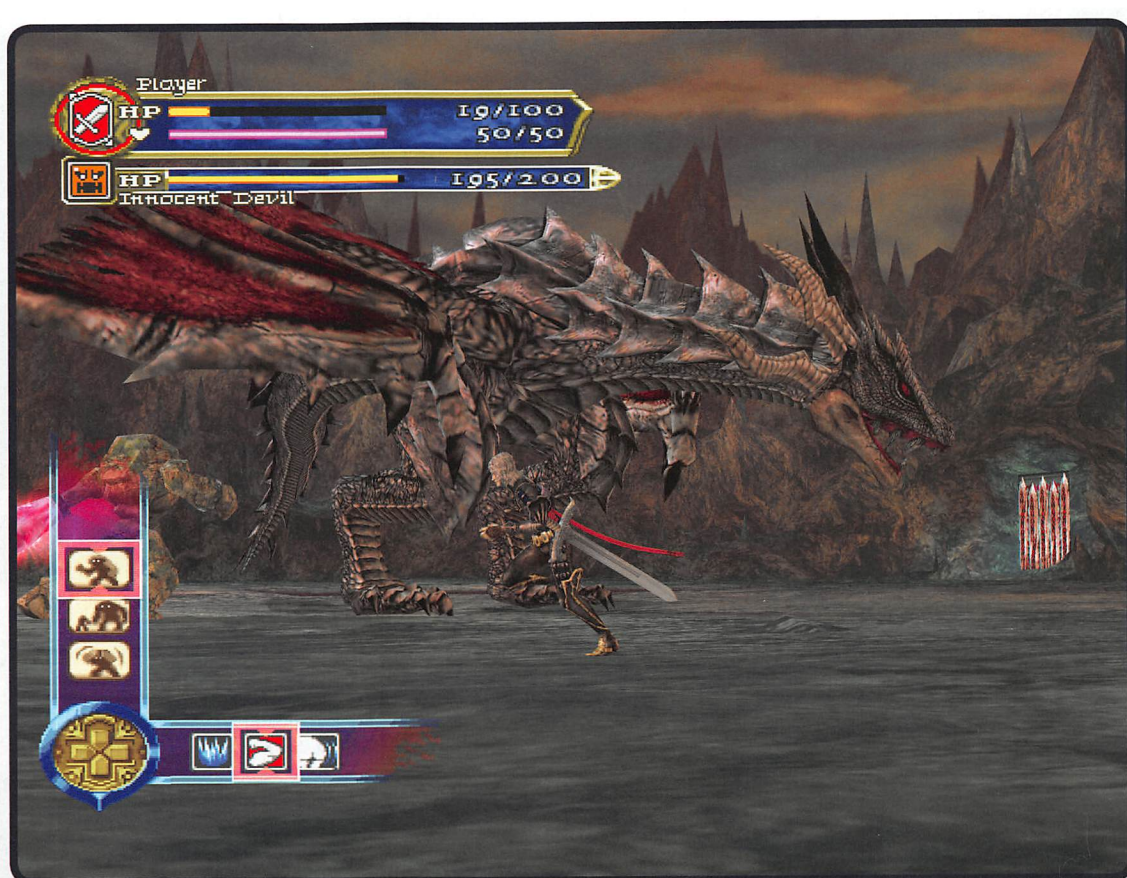
In other regards, Curse of Darkness draws significantly on the best Castlevania

Protagonist Hector is an ex-Devil Forge-master for Dracula.





The icons in the lower-left corner show the Innocent Devils' attacks.



games from the past—Symphony of the Night in particular—with an experience system, a vast interconnected castle with both indoor and outdoor areas, numerous weapon types—ranging from slow, powerful implements like spears and two-handed swords to a lightning-quick bare-handed technique—and, of course, Michiru Yamane's wonderful music. COD also ties in heavily to Castlevania III: Dracula's Curse, as the story is set only three years after that 8-bit classic. In fact, Igarashi originally wanted to create a remake of Castlevania III, but then decided that a new game set in the same time period would be better; expect some characters from Dracula's Curse to appear (it's not Alucard, but Iga won't say who



"...Curse of Darkness draws significantly on the best Castlevania games from the past..."

just yet).

At this point, Curse of Darkness doesn't seem like a gameplay revolution, but from what I've played, it's a lot of fun. Through the combination of Castlevania staples and the new Innocent Devil element, this should be an extremely satisfying venture into the world of Gothic horror and easily be the best 3D Castlevania yet.

Chris Hoffman

Castlevania: Curse of Darkness

PlayStation 2

Point of Interest

The enhanced effects engine is taken directly from Iga's recent underrated PS2 effort, NanoBreaker.

Developer: KCE Tokyo Publisher: Konami

Online: None Available: Fall

E3 First Look

2005

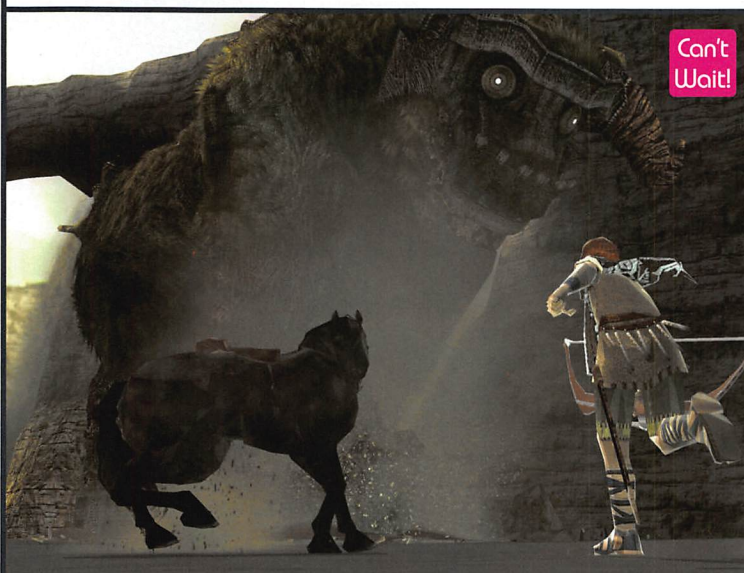
Look for this logo on games that we are especially looking forward to

Can't Wait!

We're in for one of the stranger E3s this year, with Nintendo and Sony still focused on the current generation while Microsoft is mere months away from replacing their X with an O. Remind you of anything? This was Sega's strategy not so long ago, although it feels like a galaxy far, far, away.

Shadow of the Colossus

From the developers of ICO comes Shadow of the Colossus, a tale of a young man looking to wake a loved one. What sounds typical on the surface is anything but, as the hero must travel far and wide to defeat 16 Colossi, the giants of Greek myth. Expansive exploration on horseback, mammoth battles and the use of strategy and puzzle-solving during the quest render Shadow of the Colossus absolutely stunning.



System: PlayStation 2 **Developer:** Sony **Publisher:** SCEJ **Available:** September 2005

Genji: Dawn of the Samurai

Inspired by what's regarded as the world's first novel (Tale of Genji), Genji: Dawn of the Samurai revolves around Yoshitune, a descendent of the Genji clan who fights to rid feudal Japan of the tyrannical Heishi rule. Genji promises a robust enhancement system, 30 different missions, over an hour of cinematics, and authentic motion-capture swordfighting. Now, where'd I put my katana?



System: PlayStation 2 **Developer:** Game Republic **Publisher:** Sony **Available:** Q3 2005

Jak X: Combat Racing

Building upon the vehicle segments from Jak 3, Jak X: Combat Racing features rugged vehicular designs and realistic physics amidst varied gameplay that runs the gamut from pure racing to deathmatch. All the bells and whistles are included too: six-player online, customizable vehicles, more than 20 tracks, multiple playable characters, loads of weapons and more.



System: PlayStation 2 **Developer:** Naughty Dog
Publisher: Sony **Available:** Fall

Ratchet: Deadlocked

Edgier? Darker? Insomniac denies it, but that's how things feel in the latest Ratchet game, which features a new focus on large-scale arena-based combat and a more somber visual style (just check out Ratchet's full-body armor). Hundreds of weapon enhancements will be available, but the biggest draw will likely be the co-op play and online versus modes.



System: PlayStation 2 **Developer:** Insomniac
Publisher: Sony **Available:** Fall

Sly 3: Honor Among Thieves

Sly 3 has more of everything added to its thieving and platforming escapades: more characters, more abilities, more minigames (like battles in biplanes), more exotic locations to explore, more players. Inspector Carmelita Fox and the once-villainous Dimitri will be among the expanded playable cast, and a two-player versus mode will be featured.



System: PlayStation 2 **Developer:** Sucker Punch **Publisher:** Sony **Available:** Fall

His name is Gojiro Kiryu... and he's bringing justice back to the old west...



Be a samurai or a Gunman! Unique 2 player mode allows you to play as both!



"Bushido Sense" allows you to dodge and deflect bullets with superhuman skill!



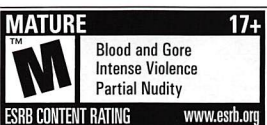
Over 100 unlockables including over 25 playable characters, 70 accessories and 20 weapons!

"This is not your everyday action game."
- Play Magazine

"Incredibly fast paced, stylish fights..."
- VGO Network

侍 SAMURAI WESTERN

Intense Samurai action from the makers of
the "Way of the Samurai" series



PlayStation 2



ACQUIRE



Fire Emblem

What a difference a year makes. While the GC version of Fire Emblem was looking somewhat questionable at this time last year, the game now looks visually impressive and seems to have all the makings of a worthy tactical RPG. One new element added to the grid-based combat is "skinshifter" characters, who transform into beasts when they attack.



System: GameCube **Developer:** Intelligent Systems **Publisher:** Nintendo **Available:** TBA 2005

Tecmo Classic Arcade Feat. Tecmo Bowl

Feeling ancient-school? Tecmo Classic Arcade Featuring Tecmo Bowl offers that classic football game along with these 10 vintage oldies: Rygar, Star Force, Solomon's Key, Bomb Jack, Tecmo Cup, Pinball Action, Pleiads, Senjo and Strato Fighter. Neatly completing the package is a gallery area where you can view old ads, manuals and posters.



System: Xbox **Developer:** Tecmo
Publisher: Tecmo **Available:** August 2005

Battalion Wars

Formerly known as Advance Wars: Under Fire, Battalion Wars visually looks a lot like it did when we saw it at last year's E3, where it featured a mix of real-time strategy and real-time combat with a diverse array of unit types. Hopefully the passing year has allowed the gameplay to improve, however, as things were looking a bit shaky before. We've got our fingers crossed.



System: GameCube **Developer:** Kuju Entertainment
Publisher: Nintendo **Available:** TBA 2005

The Warriors

Rockstar's The Warriors has been quite a long time coming, but as this new image indicates, it might actually be getting close to completion. Although we still don't know the gameplay specifics, The Warriors is based on the 1979 film of the same name, so we're expecting plenty of gang warfare, violent action and bad '70s attire.



System: PlayStation 2, Xbox **Developer:** Rockstar North
Publisher: Rockstar **Available:** TBA

Flipnic

Flipnic truly is pinball taken to the next level. While most console pinball games are mere imitations of real tables (often dull ones), Flipnic takes full advantage of its virtual existence, creating an amazing interconnected series of 3D boards that could never exist in reality, complete with complex pathways, unique interactive elements and soothing yet surrealistic visuals.



System: PlayStation 2 **Developer:** SCEI
Publisher: Capcom **Available:** Summer

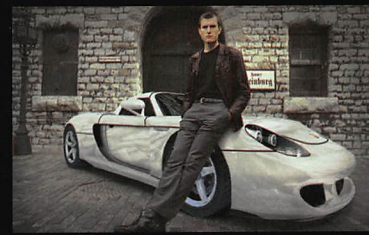
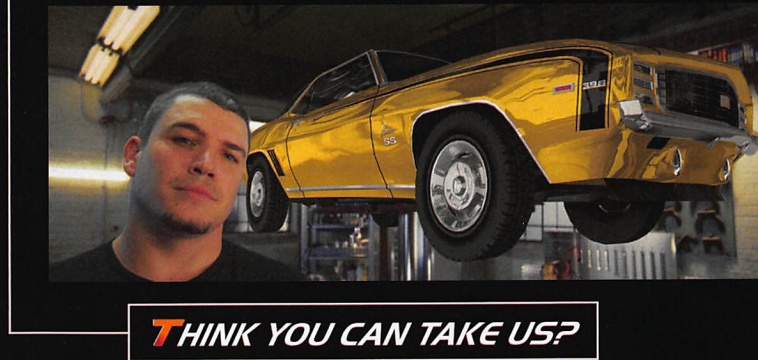
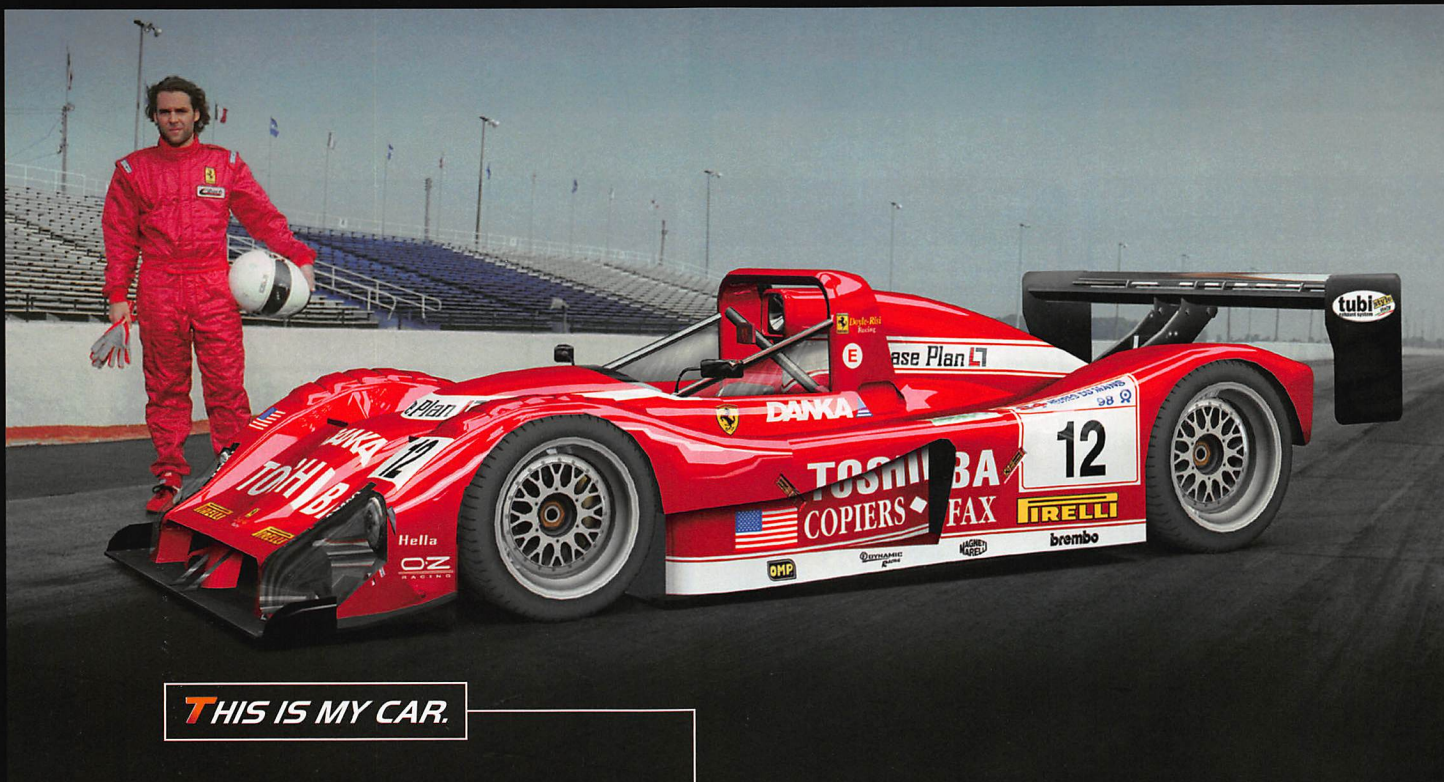
Onimusha: Dawn of Dreams

The fourth installment in the accomplished Onimusha series is certainly true in spirit to what's come before it, but a new fighting system joins a redirected art style for a welcome change. The result is striking on first impression. Other interesting changes include the ability to switch to another character who intermittently joins you on your adventure, providing attack and navigational support.



System: PlayStation 2 **Developer:** Capcom **Publisher:** Capcom **Available:** 2006

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it's good to play together

XBOX LIVE

Conflict: Global Terror

The Conflict series' popularity may belie its ultimate quality, but the series deserves props for its dramatic improvements along the way. This fourth outing is vintage Conflict, throwing a squad of four—the Desert Storm Delta Force return—into the action, which is now global and fueled by terrorists.



System: PlayStation 2, Xbox, PC **Developer:** Pivotal Games **Publisher:** 2K Games **Available:** Fall

KOF: Maximum Impact - Maniax

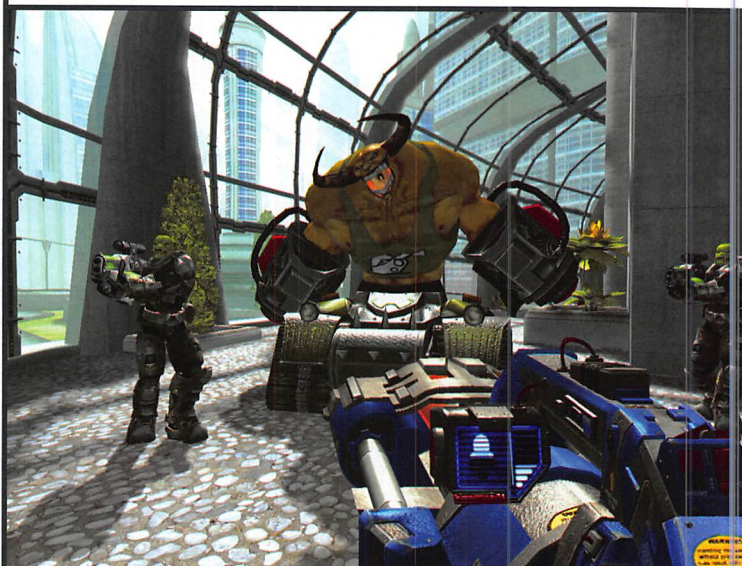
Fundamentally the same as the PS2 KOF: Maximum Impact released last year, the Xbox "Maniax" version benefits from full online support in addition to upgrades such as a language select and a stop-action camera to let fans fully appreciate the visuals. Other than that, it's solid fighting featuring a cast of classic KOF characters and all-new fighters.



System: Xbox **Developer:** SNK Playmore **Publisher:** SNK Playmore **Available:** June

Serious Sam II

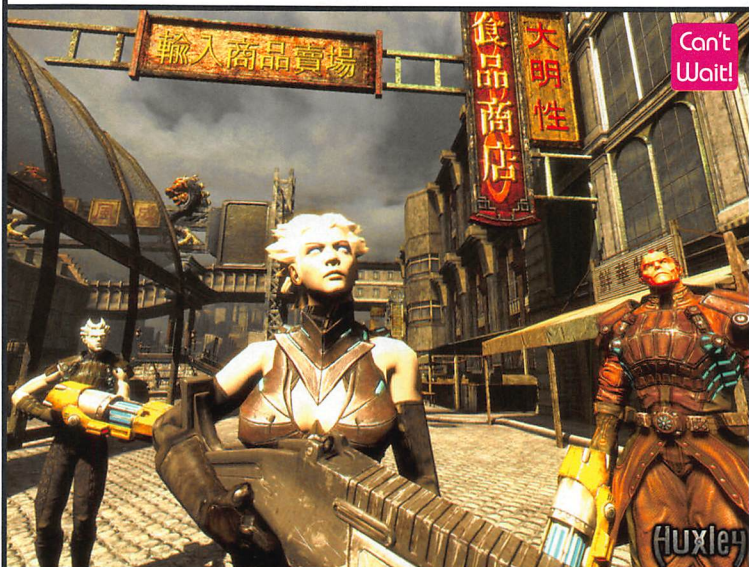
The original series creators are back with Serious Sam II, maintaining the same nutso characters and wildly frantic action. Characters pack 100 times more detail this time out, and get this: a submission is actually being made to the Guinness Book of World Records to vie for the distinction of most enemies onscreen at once in a video game.



System: Xbox, PC **Developer:** Croteam **Publisher:** 2K Games **Available:** Fall 2005

Huxley

As the name betrays, the novel "Brave New World" by author Aldous Huxley inspired this upcoming Xbox 360 online FPS. Webzen's Huxley promotes non-stop futuristic FPS action, and it's happening in a gargantuan, persistent online city. A modified Unreal Engine 3 is used to render stunning and seamless characters and environments. Huxley will include single-player missions, massive-scale action PvP, vehicles and persistent stats.



System: Xbox, PC **Developer:** Webzen **Publisher:** Webzen **Available:** 2006

Crash Tag Team Racing

No, not Crash Team Racing... Crash Tag Team Racing. This means when you're racing all your favorites from the Crash universe, you can somehow meld with other carts on the track and form a "super-car," giving you the option of driver or gunmen. Running on foot will also come into play, and in a first for this type of racer, the locations are wide open.



System: PlayStation 2, Xbox, GameCube, PC **Developer:** Radical **Publisher:** VU Games **Available:** Fall 2005

Bad Day LA

American McGee strikes again, giving gamers another weird, twisted game with a high strange factor. In Bad Day LA, you take control of Anthony Williams, a Hollywood agent turned homeless guy that's trying to achieve salvation after Los Angeles is attacked. Featuring 10 expansive levels and a very quirky artistic flair, Bad Day LA just might give this genre the game it needs.



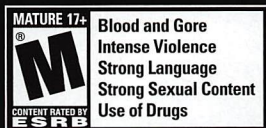
System: Xbox, PC **Developer:** Enlight Software **Publisher:** Enlight Software **Available:** Q1 2006



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Radiata Stories

From the creators of Valkyrie Profile and Star Ocean comes this ambitious action-role-playing game of scintillating fantasy. The story hinges on an enmity between humans and fairy-like beings, setting the stage for party battles carried out in real time. Characters in the world are being set up to exhibit cause-and-effect relationships that can redirect the course of the game.



System: PlayStation 2 **Developer:** tri-Ace **Publisher:** Square Enix **Available:** Fall 2005

Midway Arcade Treasures 3

Midway is bringing back the classics one more time, but this time they're sticking to a specific theme: racing. Eight classic racing properties (some more classic than others) will be included on the disc: Race Drivin', STUN Runner, Super Off Road, Hydro Thunder, San Francisco Rush 2049, San Francisco Rush: The Rock, Alcatraz Edition, Off Road Thunder and Badlands.



System: PS2, Xbox, GameCube, PC **Developer:** Digital Eclipse/Gamestar **Publisher:** Midway **Available:** Fall

Blitz: The League

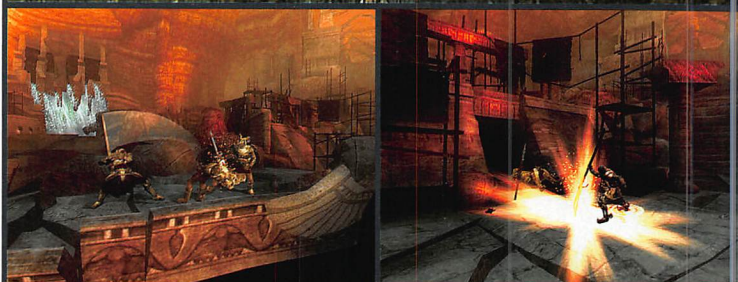
Gone are the real players, opening the door for a brutal presentation you've never seen in a football game: bones break, skulls get crushed, even a little blood spills from the nastiest knocks, possibly knocking your player out for good. Slow the action on field to pull off crazy moves, and follow the outcome of your antics in a story mode.



System: PlayStation 2, Xbox **Developer:** Midway Chicago **Publisher:** Midway **Available:** Winter 2005

Gauntlet: Seven Sorrows

Continuing the legacy of the renowned franchise, Gauntlet: Seven Sorrows returns players to a medieval world of swordplay and magical powers complemented by RPG-like character growth. Like the arcade classic, four-players can play cooperatively (and now online!), even using powerful junction attacks, in a game with a deeper story than the Gauntlet norm.



System: PlayStation 2, Xbox, PC **Developer:** Midway San Diego **Publisher:** Midway **Available:** Winter

Romancing SaGa

Essentially an enhanced remake of the 16-bit original (which was never released in the U.S.), Romancing SaGa is an open-ended RPG with eight playable main characters, set in a world where the ancient evil of Saruin is on the brink of return. Each character has their own scenario and game-altering choices to make, and the game is visually amazing.



System: PlayStation 2 **Developer:** Square Enix **Publisher:** Square Enix **Available:** TBA

Dirge of Cerberus: ff VII

An action-shooter sequel to the beloved Final Fantasy VII, Dirge of Cerberus takes place three years after the original FFXVII and one year after Advent Children. The troubled hero is none other than Vincent Valentine, discovering things about Midgar never before revealed, taking action to save the planet before it's too late.

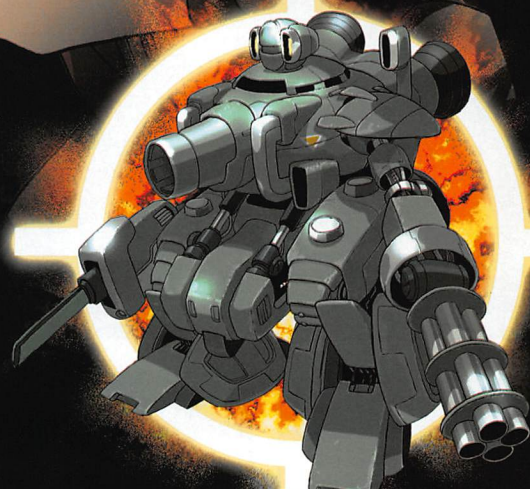


System: PlayStation 2 **Developer:** Square Enix **Publisher:** Square Enix **Available:** TBA

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Animated Blood,
Violence

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The Matrix: Path of Neo

For those of you who wanted to control Neo in Enter the Matrix, this is the game you've been waiting for. Path of Neo allows you to take control of The One, reliving moments from all three films in the *Matrix* trilogy. The Wachowski Brothers collaborate once again on what's sure to be a big hit with Neo-philes and trilogy newbies alike.



System: PlayStation 2, Xbox, PC **Developer:** Shiny **Publisher:** Atari **Available:** November

Indigo Prophecy

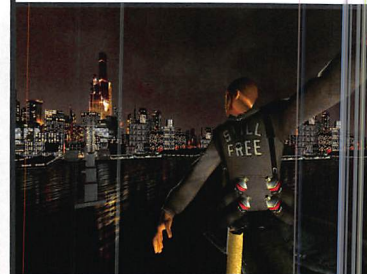
Lucas Kane suddenly killed someone, and he doesn't know why... Ordinary people killing complete strangers is the premise of *Indigo Prophecy*, a game that looks to revolutionize the paranormal thriller genre. With four different playable characters, and new gameplay aspects like Motion Physical Action Reaction and Physical Action Reaction, this game is looking cooler by the minute.



System: PlayStation 2, Xbox, PC **Developer:** Quantic Dream **Publisher:** Atari **Available:** September

Marc Ecko's Getting Up: Contents Under Pressure

It's the future, and the future sucks: expression is a rare commodity, eroded by a corrupt government. Bringing color back to this bleak world is graffiti artist Trane, who sets out on tagging missions as he deals with rival foes in hand-to-hand and weapons combat. Inspired by and containing real graffiti artists, the game is reaching for some unusually authentic ground.



System: PlayStation 2 **Developer:** The Collective **Publisher:** Atari **Available:** September

Ultimate Spider-Man

As evidenced by its title, the latest game adventure of the wall-crawler is set in the *Ultimate Spider-Man* alternate comic book continuity, where Spidey will be exploring wide-open environs and facing off against his popular nemesis, Venom, in a tale concocted by the comic's creative team. Cel-shaded graphics and interactive comic book-style presentation add to the visual flourish.



System: PlayStation 2, Xbox, GameCube, PC **Developer:** Treyarch **Publisher:** Activision **Available:** Fall

Time Shift

Colonel Albert Swift's been sent back to 1900, returning to his present day with some newfound problems, many of which he will forcefully eliminate with guns in a first-person view. Dealing with time-travel technology and its disturbing implications, AI's gonna continually come up against uniquely altered scenarios and puzzles.



System: Xbox, PC **Developer:** Saber Interactive **Publisher:** Atari **Available:** Fall 2005

X-Men Legends II: Rise of Apocalypse

Continuing the top-down mutant mayhem of the original *X-Men Legends*, the sequel puts players in control of not only the X-Men but members of the Brotherhood of Mutants as well, fighting side-by-side against the evils of Apocalypse. More famous X-Men locales will be represented, such as Genosha, and the multiplayer mode now has full online support.



System: PlayStation 2, Xbox, GameCube **Developer:** Raven Software **Publisher:** Activision **Available:** Fall

DIGITAL DEVIL GAGA

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"A CUTTING EDGE, MODERN RPG. . . DDS IS A GREAT FINAL FANTASY ALTERNATIVE." — EGM

"SHIN MEGAMI TENSEI: DIGITAL DEVIL SAGA MAY JUST BE THAT NEXT GAME THAT BREAKS THE MOLD OF ITS GENRE, AND SETS ITSELF APART AS ONE OF THE BEST GAMES OF ALL TIME." — 10/10 — GAME CHRONICLES MAGAZINE

"SHIN MEGAMI TENSEI: DIGITAL DEVIL SAGA ... IS A WORK OF GENIUS." — CYBER GAMING NETWORK

"HANDS DOWN THE BEST RPG ON THIS GENERATION OF CONSOLES." — INSIDE PULSE

"A DARKER RPG FOR AN OLDER GENERATION OF GAMERS." — GAMEPRO

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We Love Katamari

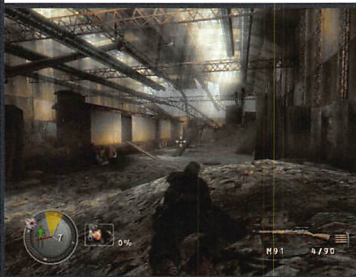
The King of Cosmos needs to put back the rest of the stars in the solar system! Here comes We Love Katamari, the sequel to the much-adored original, Katamari Damacy. WLK plans to bring even more fun into the mix by adding a co-op mode, the ability to play as the Prince and any of his cousins, and more get-stuck-in-your-head songs.



System: PlayStation 2 **Developer:** Namco
Publisher: Namco **Available:** Q4 2005

Sniper Elite: Berlin 1945

As an American soldier posing as a German, your mission is to sneak through war-torn Berlin and eliminate key military targets. Moving solo, your presence is silent and efficient, relying on a sniper rifle for the kill. But simply pulling the trigger won't do much good when you've got gravity, wind speed, elevation, body functions and other factors to contend with before the sight is set.



System: PlayStation 2, Xbox **Developer:** Rebellion
Publisher: Namco **Available:** Winter 2005

Soul Calibur III

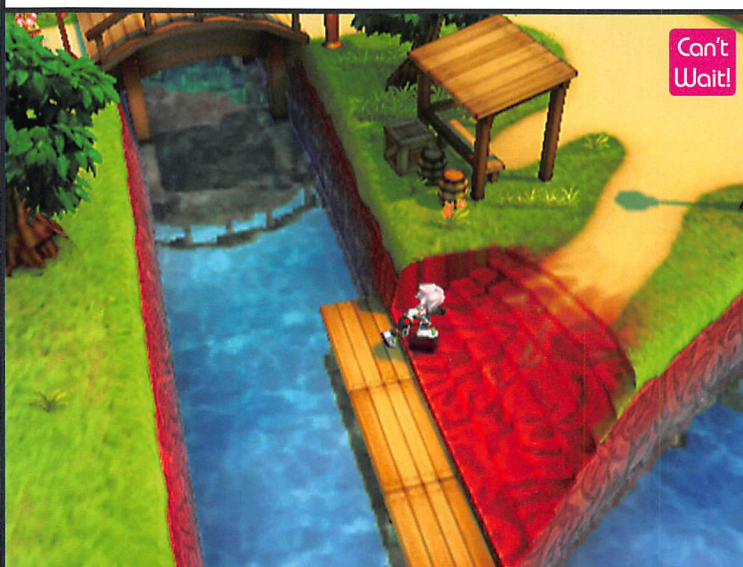
Soul Calibur is regarded by many as the best fighting game there is, and Namco's expanding the genre with its third installment. Choose from over 25 classic SC characters in Tales of Souls mode to discover their fates, overcome unique challenges in the Soul Arena, or create and customize your own character to bring into battle. Is your soul ready?



System: PlayStation 2 **Developer:** Namco **Publisher:** Namco **Available:** 2005

Tales of Legendia

With striking visuals, bold character designs by Kazuo Nakazawa (*Kill Bill Vol. 1*) and an intriguing story that finds two siblings stranded on a mysterious, giant, island-like ship called the Legacy, Namco's Tales series makes a striking return on PS2. The game also features a new real-time battle system, which is said to have the depth and controls of a full-fledged fighting game.



System: PlayStation 2 **Developer:** Namco **Publisher:** Namco **Available:** February 2006

Urban Reign

Led by a team comprising Tekken and Soul Calibur talent, Urban Reign dumps you into the grittier corners of a fictional city, laying the smack down on a cast of over 60 brawlers caught up in a turf war. Along with scattered weapons like bats and broken bottles, you can up the damage quotient with help from buddy AI.



System: PlayStation 2 **Developer:** Namco
Publisher: Namco **Available:** TBA 2005

Pac-Man World 3

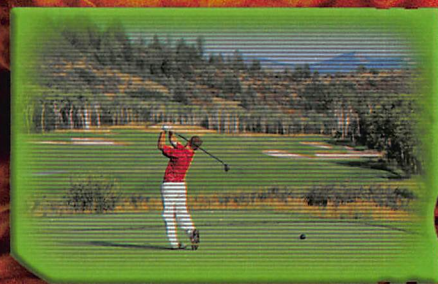
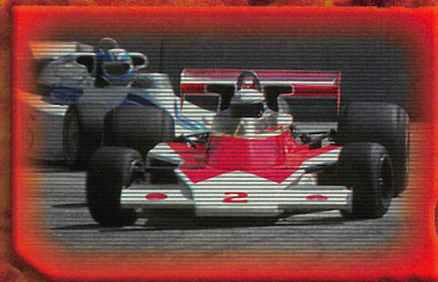
Can you believe it's been 25 years since Pac-Man debuted in arcades? Scary, but it's a fact. Namco is celebrating with the release of Pac-Man World 3, the latest in the series of Pac-Man's platforming adventures. In addition to familiar returning abilities, Pac-Man will gain new moves like climbing walls, swinging on poles and even controlling enemy ghosts Pinky and Clyde.



System: PlayStation 2, Xbox, GameCube **Developer:** Blitz
Publisher: Namco **Available:** Fall

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MotoGP 4

The latest in Namco's series of motorcycle racing simulators—not be confused with the similar series from THQ—once again emphasizes realistic physics and features all the authentic riders, tracks and bikes that fans have come to expect. Added features include eight-player online gameplay, new training and melee modes and parts tests to help with upgrades.



System: PlayStation 2 **Developer:** Namco
Publisher: Namco **Available:** Summer

Aeon Flux

Set to coincide with the theatrical release starring Charlize Theron in the hard-to-squeeze-into role of Aeon Flux, the game (which will thankfully be voiced by the lovely Ms. Theron) ties together Peter Chung's animated series, which ran on MTV from 1992-1997, and the motion picture, which is slated for release this fall.

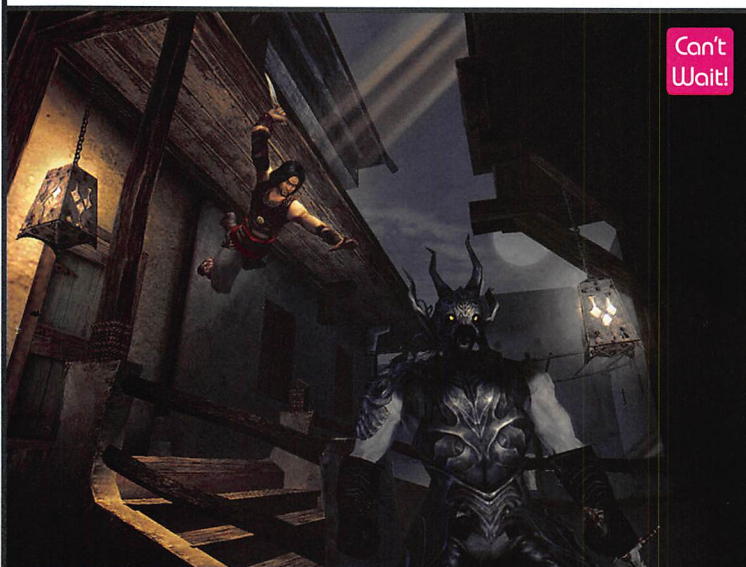


Can't Wait!

System: PlayStation 2, Xbox **Developer:** Terminal Reality
Publisher: Majesco **Available:** Fall

Prince of Persia 3

The Prince became a bad-ass in Prince of Persia 2, but not bad-ass enough to avoid capture on his way back to Babylon. His lover Kaileena is forced to play savior, unleashing the Sands of Time and causing all sorts of sequel nastiness. So the adventure begins in Babylon, with a deeper battle system and a new playable character in the mix.



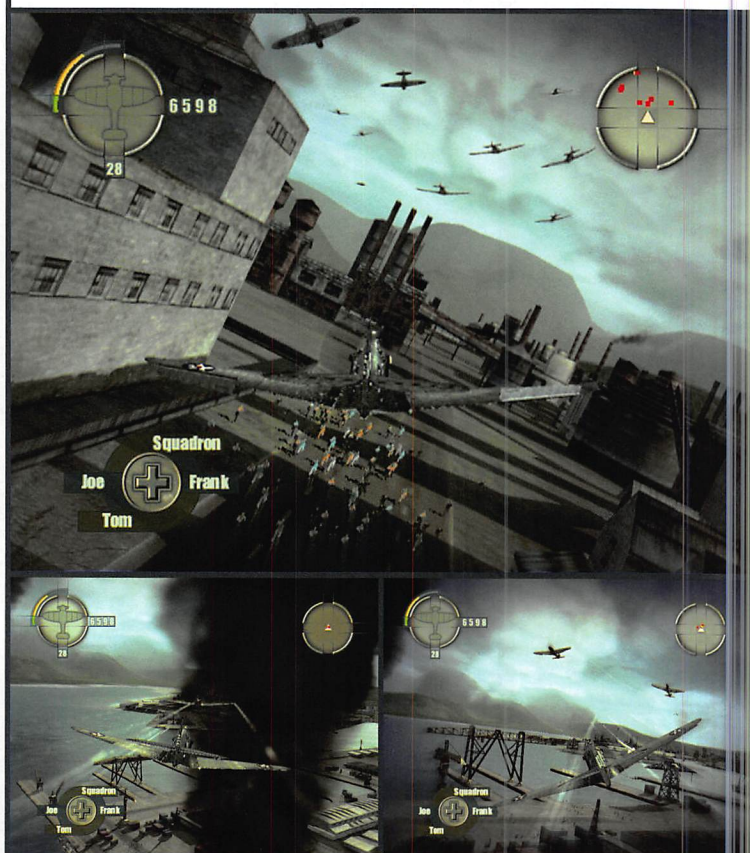
Can't Wait!



System: PlayStation 2, Xbox, GameCube, PC **Developer:** Ubisoft **Publisher:** Ubisoft **Available:** 2006

Blazing Angels: Squadrons of WWII (working title)

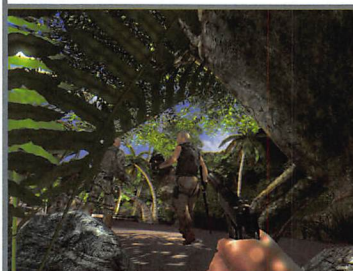
Who *doesn't* love a good dogfight? Blazing Angels takes you deep into the heart of WWII's most epic battles through the eyes of a squadron commander/ace fighter pilot. With player-controlled AI squad members, ultra-realistic WWII aircraft and 20 different missions all around the globe, Blazing Angels seems to be shaping up as a gorgeous flight sim... with substance.



System: Xbox **Developer:** Ubisoft **Publisher:** Ubisoft **Available:** September

Far Cry Instincts

The winning PC first-person shooter goes Xbox, built from a new engine suited for the console. Apparently the game is receiving a few substantial changes, maintaining the foundation of the original while adding in new scenarios and expanding some of the gameplay. The island setting looks fantastic.



System: Xbox **Developer:** Crytek/Ubisoft Montreal
Publisher: Ubisoft **Available:** Fall 2005

Tom Clancy's Ghost Recon 3

Tom Clancy's Ghost Recon 3 returns to the same squad-based warfare the series is known for, taking its Special Forces team into Mexico City to battle an insurgency. The singular city environment is built on a new engine, showcasing impressive particle and lighting effects that take the visual integrity of the series to a new level.



System: PS2, Xbox, GameCube, PC, Xbox 360 **Developer:** Ubisoft
Publisher: Ubisoft **Available:** Winter 2005

"Puyo Pop is one of the most successful falling-piece puzzle games ever conceived." - IGN.com

do you have the FEVER?!

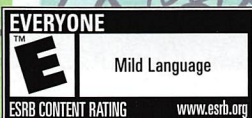


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Bio hazard



Dave Halverson
Editor in Chief

Dave critiques every game based on how well it hits its target audience, and has been practicing what he preaches in print for 13 years. He truly lives for his games. Within everything Dave writes, you will also find a little bit of his personal love of the art of gaming and game creation, the driving force in his life outside of music and actual human interaction.

Favorite genres: Platformers, adventure, motocross, action-RPGs, 2D

Now playing: Advent Rising, Gunstar Super Heroes, Doom 3, Psychonauts

Favorite Star Wars Character: Watto



Brady Fiechter
Executive Editor

Brady feels that when you've been playing video games since video games were invented, you tend to start to look past the unnecessary need to boil a game down to its mechanical parts and start to see the artistry and spirit of imagination that goes into its creation. It's never as simple as polygons and cool explosions.

Favorite genres: Adventure, first-person shooters, action, RPGs

Now playing: ICO...again!

Favorite Star Wars Character: Boba Fett



Chris Hoffman
Senior Editor

Having attended WrestleMania 21 last month, Chris is still caught in the grip of rasslin' fever, despite the problems with the game of the same name. The first wrestling game that Chris really got into was Rare's WWF WrestleMania Challenge on the NES, although he can't deny the greatness of Pro Wrestling. His all-time fave is WrestleMania 2000 on the N64.

Favorite genres: RPGs, action, adventure, fighting, wrestling

Now playing: Ganbare Goemon 1 & 2

Favorite Star Wars Character: Lando Calrissian

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play magazine

GAME
of the
MONTH



Capcom Fighting Evolution

056

Capcom Fighting Evolution blew us away on PS2 last year with its combination of fighting styles and classic, super-crisp, 2D gameplay. Now the Xbox version is here...and it's online.

Rating System

- 10...Perfect
- 9...Extraordinary
- 8...Great
- 7...Good
- 6...Decent
- 5...Average
- 4...Below average
- 3...Poor
- 2...Bad
- 1...Terrible

Our scores represent both a game's technical merits and our personal opinions based on our expertise within each genre, of which the numbers alone do not necessarily tell the whole story. A perfect 10 represents a game that is flawless in the reviewer's opinion. Such a high standard means that 10s will be incredibly rare, but when it happens, it symbolizes that this game isn't just the very best—it's the best of the best.



Mike Griffin
PC Editor

Even as a wee lad playing Zaxxon on Coleco, the technology and artistry of game design has always fascinated Mike. He thinks some games are timeless in that respect, whether 2D, 3D, flat-shaded or bump mapped. Mike's goal is to equip the readers with accurate information, so that limited funds and time can be put to good use.

Favorite genres: MMORPGs, first-person shooters, action-adventure

Now playing: Guild Wars

Favorite Star Wars Character: Boba Fett



Ashley "Veela" Esqueda
Associate Editor

To Ashley, video games are like magnificent pieces of art: you don't break down the piece as a whole to comment on the brush stroke method or colors used. She thanks her mother for playing Castlevania II after school, and everyone in elementary school for shunning her, because without them, her obsession with gaming would not have been possible.

Favorite genres: Action, RPG, adventure

Now playing: Untold Legends

Favorite Star Wars Character: Han Solo...he shot first!



Michael Hobbs
Art Director

A gamer since Space Invaders, Michael has a soft spot for 2D shooters and other games that directly engage the player. Nintendo certainly ranks high on his list of favorite developers, and though recent forays into the world of MMORPGs have rather consumed him, he'll always have time for a game of Bangaio.

Favorite genres: Action, racing, adventure, alternative, shooters

Now playing: Electroplankton

Favorite Star Wars Character: Nien Nunb



A thousand years have passed since Ragnarok, when the gods of Asgard sacrificed their power to seal demons away with Grim Angels. The demons' power is stirring, and the Seven Magi have no choice but to actuate the Retribution--a cataclysmic event that spells the end for Riviera. Two angels descend on Riviera, Diviners in hand... unaware of the darkness to follow if they succeed...

Branching paths of adventure
lead to multiple endings!



Leviathan
Riviera should be just
beyond Heaven's Gate.



Unique item system changes
the item's properties
depending on the user!



A beautiful fantasy world
drawn in lush detail!

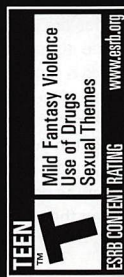
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Still Life

Film noir with an edge

When the opening chorus of *Still Life* rings in your ears, you get this feeling...a feeling of uneasiness. As you hear the chanting in Latin, and you watch the brilliantly presented opening cutscene, you're already sucked in. A gripping (and somewhat paralleled) storyline moves back and forth between 1920s Prague and present-day Chicago; each story features a serial killer on the loose and one tough cop trying to solve the murder mystery. *Still Life* delivers a serious dose of film noir while still retaining a modern take on the genre, and only falters in few areas.

Now, I'll be the first to tell you—I'm a sucker for stuff like *Still Life*. Serial killers and tough cops leave me a little weak in the knees. However, there's this brilliant layer of *Still Life* that you usually don't get from a game in this genre. The voice-over is incredible, and not only does it lend substantial amounts of credibility to Victoria and Gus McPherson (our two heroes), it also reinforces all of the minor players in the game. Where you'd usually expect a ton of cheesy dialect and over-used clichés, *Still Life* delivers believable stars in Gus and Victoria and a great ensemble cast built around them. It wouldn't have been half as great if it were solely text-based. Everyone was given outstanding voiceover—everyone. The worlds in which Gus and Victoria investigate their respective mysteries are intricately built and sustained by the strong voice acting.

Still Life is a point-and-click game, meaning you move from one pre-rendered scene to the next, checking out anything that might catch your character's eye. The backdrops are gorgeous, period. Even the gruesome crime scenes have a haunting beauty about them...it's almost a strange

intertwining of reality and the surreal, like life with a filter on it. You're also usually directed by your counterparts on where/what you should be checking out next.

This might seem awfully linear, but the straightforward story is complicated by these puzzles that could drive someone insane. In particular, I think I spent more than a few hours trying to solve this crazy cookie-making puzzle, and I wanted to chuck my controller through my TV in a fit of rage. The puzzles are great; if anyone remembers, it's very reminiscent of *The 11th Hour*...difficult, but not impossible. When you finally solve the ones that have you stumped, you're usually treated to a huge piece of the story, which gives a nice sense of accomplishment.

All in all, *Still Life* is a spectacular title: fun, intriguing, intelligent...all the pieces of a great adventure puzzle. The ending (I won't spoil it for you) has a nice twist and an interesting finale. There's supposed to be a spill-over of the story into the online realm, but as of press time, the official *Still Life* website hadn't changed, so I haven't gotten to experience that part of the mystery yet. Microïds and The Adventure Company delivered a gripping game with an edge, and *Still Life* is that game.

Ashley Esqueda

Still Life		8.5
Xbox (reviewed), PC		Score
<p>Beautiful backdrops, excellent story, incredible voice over; certainly not your typical serial-killer tale.</p>		
<p>Story ends a little open-ended; point-and-click might be too linear for some gamers; puzzles make you want to kill someone. . .</p>		
<p>Developer: Microïds Publisher: The Adventure Company</p>		
<p>Online: Interactive elements Available: May</p>		

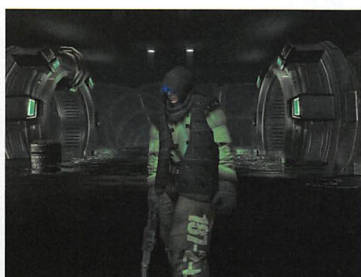
"Even the gruesome crime scenes have a haunting beauty about them...it's almost a strange intertwining of reality and the surreal..."



As you can see, this isn't your typical clichéd mystery.

Pariah

The Unreal guys go solo with decent results



Let's see here... Shotgun and rocket launcher and sniper rifle—check. Melee weapon and grenades and plasma gun—check. Exploding barrels conveniently scattered for satisfying death traps. A few vehicles with big gun-mounts for a break from the on-foot killing (could have done without those). Fairly generic near-future military/industrial/dusky surroundings. Faceless soldier-like enemies with helmets and guard towers to perch in...

Ok, so all the durable first-person shooter parts are here, nicely locked and loaded for a solid all-out killing fest not unlike many before it. It all works well enough, but if there is one overriding flaw to Pariah, it's that the game never takes off for full engagement, lacking the sophistication and panache of better efforts.

The stage is set when your beleaguered

character, Dr. Jack Mason, survives the crash of a transport ship carrying an infected patient and prisoner, Karina. As you embark to get off the prison-colony planet, you intermittently cross paths with your patient, who's supposed to provide a curious emotional core to the game but ends up one of the casualties of a disconnected, muddled narrative that never goes anywhere with its ideas. Forget the story and enjoy the incessant shooting, which plays out just as you'd expect from a predictable first-person shooter: guys hide behind rocks and walls, converge on your position, firefight ensues. The enemies sometimes look unnatural in their movement, skating around like bots in a more quick-kill arena shooter, but what they sometimes lack in visual engagement they replace with plenty of fun resistance.

Ammo conservation is never a worry, and while the actual health system is

"...all the durable first-person shooter parts are here, nicely locked and loaded..."



Explosions only get bigger once you've properly upgraded your weapons...



interesting—you inject yourself for healing, which can temporarily throw off your senses—there's more than enough juice lying around to keep you briskly plowing forward. The more inventive component to Pariah is the weapons upgrade, which allows each weapon to go through three-stage enhancements, carried out through energy core pickups.

There are times playing the game where you might be compelled to just stop and enjoy the surroundings. Towards the end, things really start to look impressive, with giant architectural spaces stretching all around you, and it's fun to make your way to other sections and stare out to where you've been. I also like the balance between expansive outdoor areas and more confined, winding, indoor buildings, and the occasional ability to shred chunks of concrete out of the larger structures was a nice touch.

If you find yourself wanting more out of Pariah, the final support comes in strong

online play. The deathmatch and capture-the-flag thing isn't going to get you too worked up if you're spent on the countless other similar online shooters, but what might really keep you glued is the ability to create maps and throw them up on Live to share. The value here ultimately comes down to the creativity of the Pariah community. Decent package overall.

Brady Fiechter

Pariah

Xbox, PC

All the solid FPS components are in place; good-looking settings.

It all feels a little generic and in need of more punch to play in the big leagues.

Developer: Digital Extremes Publisher: Groove Games

Online: 16p versus Available: May

7.5

Score



Atelier Iris

Eternal Mana

A big, rich hand-drawn Japanese RPG forged on alchemy, virtual mana as pets and a funky English dub; there's hope for us yet

"...the odds of a hand-drawn RPG coming out stateside these days are about as good as a Batman: Dark Tomorrow sequel, so enjoy this (last?) one."



For their third game in the Atelier series, Atelier Iris: Eternal Mana, strategy-RPG demigods GUST deliver a game closer to their '98 PS original than the strategy/breeding-heavy PS2 sequel, opting for a Lunar-meets-Landstalker-style RPG built around the series' alchemic roots. And not a moment too soon; the odds of a hand-drawn RPG coming out stateside these days are about as good as a Batman: Dark Tomorrow sequel, so enjoy this (last?) one. I was hoping for something more along the lines of Thousand Arms (hand-drawn characters on polygonal backgrounds), but this will do nicely as a farewell to the lighthearted and spirited hand-drawn RPG of yesteryear on PS2.

This time around, we join traveling alchemist Klein Kiesling—descendant of the much-heralded Dafune—and his

Mana pal Popo as they meet up with a mysterious Galgazit girl (mercenaries paid by the city to keep out Growloons, aka monsters), Lita, and embark on an epic quest rife with all the usual trappings (mystery characters, conniving adversaries, villagers in need and so forth) along with a few well-placed twists and turns. Aside from the usual blasé over-world connections (ie, a tiny Klein sprite caroming across bare-bones polygonal fields) that deliver you to the game's hand-drawn isometric towns and strongholds, you'll enjoy a bit of iso-jumping, interacting and exploring in between the impressive 2D turn-based battles.

Atelier's main draw is a deeply nuanced alchemy system that sets it apart from the run of the RPG mill. The extraction and synthesis of Mana is really at the core of the adventure. Synthesis of found items



is carried out either in shops—where concoctions are added to the menu for you to buy and/or bolster the establishment's reputation (so you're essentially mixing your own items)—or by Mana themselves: virtual-pet-like companions that can forge elements into spells and items on the go. As you discover new Mana, their element is added to the "Action Dial," which allows Klein to disintegrate different mineral-based barriers, creating platforms or openings to previously sealed areas, bringing a cool action component to the questing part of the game. The turn-based battles are the real attraction, however, as they are both gorgeous and deeply nuanced, especially as you assail rank, attack and Mana levels, and grow your party beyond three, thus opening up the "switch" function.

The interaction and story elements are also handled well via spoken roles, except for the odd choice to use modern euphemisms in an enchanted old-world fantasy setting. There are few things worse, in my opinion, than frumpy old villagers exclaiming "It's freakin' awesome, you gotta check it out!" or an Egyptian-robed native asking "Dude, where'd my surfboard go?" Elsewhere, the exchanges are as cheeky as can be, so be warned; high drama this ain't, even when it tries to be. There's little to no drama to be had here; even your arch-nemesis is somewhat

of a boob. My other complaint with Atelier Iris is the amount of time you spend fighting baby pigs and gummy drops. I can take this for a map or two, but six-plus hours in, to still be fighting candy is unacceptable. The game's huge, and the enemies do evolve, but it takes too long in my opinion. There's a real disconnect between Klein and the backgrounds too (as in almost no collision, footstep sounds or shadows) but this is acceptable given it's an RPG first and foremost with mild iso-jumping elements. It's a shame GUST didn't really apply themselves to the action and make it more like Landstalker, but hey, there's always the sequel.

As a lighthearted, beautifully drawn RPG, Atelier Iris delivers exactly as promised, a deep, non-violent, involving, at times engaging fantastical quest, which is surely more than suitable for its niche. It may not attract the masses, but hey, the best games often don't. Dave Halverson

Atelier Iris: Eternal Mana

PlayStation 2

7.5

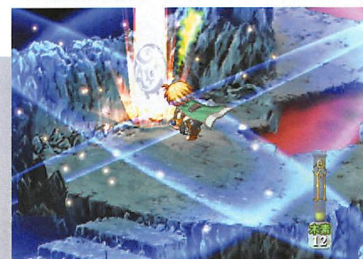
Score

Beautiful hand-drawn graphics, great soundtrack, deep alchemy system, and the Popo training vignettes are hilarious.

Repetitive enemies, cheeky and/or drama-draining dialogue, shoddy action.

Developer: GUST Publisher: NIS America

Online: None Available: May



Atelier Iris' are some of the best turn-based battles in recent years.



Metal Slug 4 & 5

A double-dose of heavy metal

Intense side-scrolling shooting, classic pick-up-and-play action, awesome mechanical designs and beautifully detailed hand-drawn 2D visuals—that's what Metal Slug is all about. This latest home conversion of the Neo Geo-based coin-ops brings two complete Metal Slug games right onto console in one convenient package, and while the design is pretty much by the numbers as far as Metal Slug goes, what's typical by SNK standards equates to a few hours of incredible old-school adrenaline rush by any other scale. Metal Slug 4 & 5 has a flaw or two, but it's solid fun while it lasts.

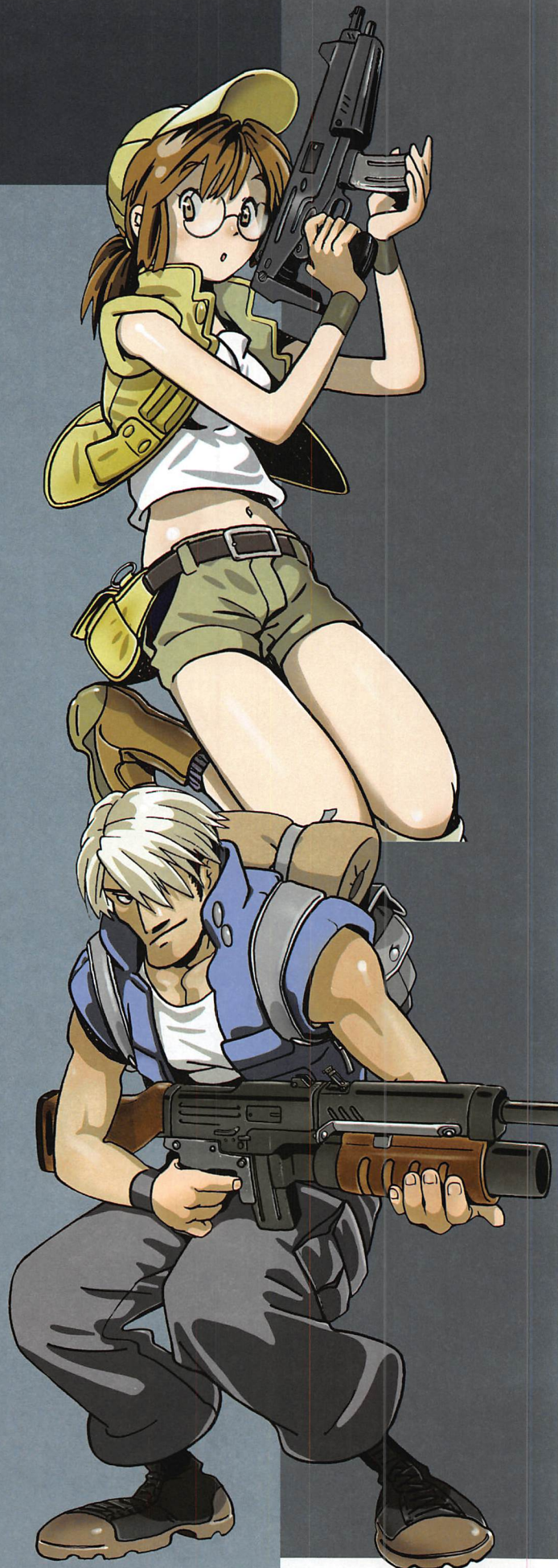
If you haven't been keeping track of Metal Slug—now going strong for the better part of a decade—then you've been missing out on one of the true classics of the shooting genre, standing beside Contra as the epitome of run 'n' gun gameplay. The formula is simple: select your cartoony hero, grab a power-up or four, rescue some POWs, charge into battle and blast away anything in your

path, deftly avoiding the enemy onslaught, occasionally jumping into a Metal Slug tank or other vehicle to do so.

A constant deluge of explosive set pieces that would put any Hollywood blockbuster to shame provides the backdrop, with breathtaking scenes like battling jet fighters from atop a moving truck, blasting through a subway tunnel in a screen-filling spider-like mech or laying waste to a submarine from the fragments of a sinking ship, amidst locales like rubble-strewn towns, snowy mountains (complete with yeti infestation), enemy warehouses, torch-lit tombs where mummies come to life, an undersea base and a haunted house with an enormous Frankenstein-inspired robot waiting at the end. A total of 11 stages await in all: six in MS4 and five in MS5.

Of course, what makes Metal Slug so endearing is its details. Hand-drawn 2D visuals and little animation touches everywhere add an amazing amount of charm to a game that's about war and

"...what's typical by SNK standards equates to a few hours of incredible old-school adrenaline rush..."

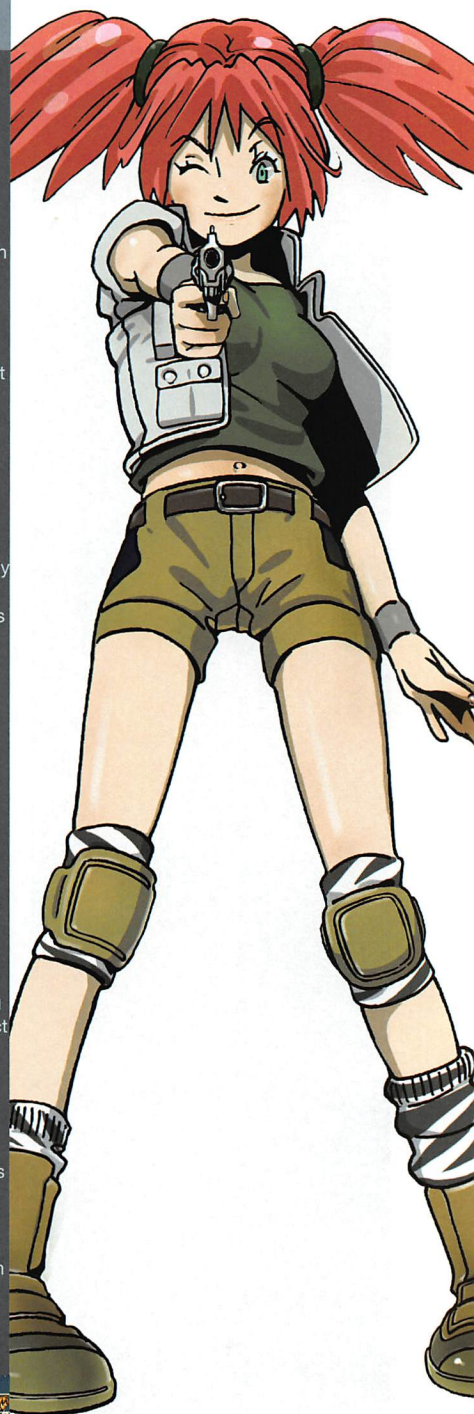




destruction. Leaves fall and birds flee as enemies attack through the jungle canopy; soldiers carelessly jabber on the radio before spotting you, throwing their arms up in terror and attacking; zombies convincingly sway in between hurling streams of toxic vomit; children run when their snowman turns out to be an enemy in disguise; Fio, in her idle animation, whips out a blanket and starts having a picnic—extra touches like these make Metal Slug more than just a typical action game. And that's to say nothing of the animations that actually affect gameplay—like the mad scientist who turns you into a monkey, granting the ability to swing from beams while holding your weapon with your foot—or the incredible bosses, which still rank up there among the best in gaming today. Just wait until you get to the final boss in Metal Slug 5; it might seem horribly out of place (it seems like it would have been more at home in Castlevania), but it's awfully damn cool.

There is, however, a fly in the ointment, and that would be Metal Slug's difficulty. While some complained that the home version of Metal Slug 3 was too strict with continues, SNK has gone the other way with 4 & 5, allowing infinite continues right where the player died, ensuring that anyone will finish the game on their first attempt, even in hard mode. Couldn't the developers have made it an adjustable option? Or let players unlock more credits the more they play the game, slowly providing help to those who need it? There are certainly reasons to replay the game—exploring multiple routes, rescuing the hundreds of POWs, achieving a perfect score, and the sheer fun of it all—but it doesn't have the "must play it again" feeling it would have if continuing to play and improve actually had some more substantial meaning.

Easy difficulty aside, Metal Slug 4 & 5 is a great game—a rare breed that followers of 2D visuals and old-school action can truly enjoy. With the long-promised Metal Slug 3D on the way and no Metal Slug 6 in sight, this could be the last 2D Metal Slug on console, so fans should enjoy it while they can. Chris Hoffman



Left: This bizarre zombie-like walker is just one of many vehicles you can use.

Metal Slug 4 & 5

PlayStation 2 (reviewed), Xbox

8.0
Score

Intense, highly detailed, classic shooting action.

You'll beat it in one sitting.

Developer: SNK Playmore Publisher: SNK Playmore
Online: None Available: May (PS2), August (Xbox)





Capcom Fighting Evolution

Xbox

Developer: Capcom Publisher: Capcom Online: 2p versus Available: June

9.0

Score

If you happened to catch my review of the PS2 version of Capcom Fighting Evolution when it hit last year, then you may recall that I considered it one of the best 2D fighting games in memory. The same holds true for the Xbox version. With a great cast of more than 20 characters drawn from various Capcom fighting games, flawless controls and some of the most crisp, precise combat I've ever witnessed, the game is a dream for the 2D fighting faithful. Although the Xbox version doesn't do anything about the lack of modes (one of the few criticisms I had about the PS2 version), it does take the action online, adding more replay to an already stellar title. The endings are still awesome. *Chris Hoffman*

"...flawless controls and some of the most crisp, precise combat I've ever witnessed..."



Spy vs. Spy

Xbox

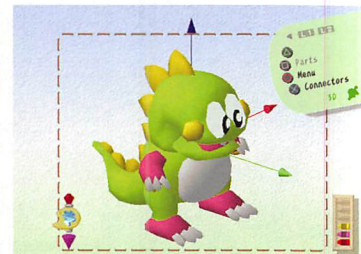
Dev: Vicious Cycle Pub: Global Star Software Online: None Available: April

6.0

Score

How bittersweet. VC has crafted a fine bit of software here, but in the process robbed the sultans of rude of their deviousness. Overly simplistic and staged cause-and-effect do not a good Spy vs. Spy game make. Bonanza Bros.-style 2D is the only way to go here, as it was and always should be. They have made a go of it in 3D, however, resulting in a mildly amusing single-player game and a closer (but still no cigar) multiplayer Live "Modern Mode," in which four spies grab and go just like the awesome GBC game. Don't get too excited over "Classic Mode" either; it's 3D as well. I like what they've done with the graphics, music and level design; the game's just not nearly nasty or funny enough. Too canned. *Dave Halverson*

"Overly simplistic and staged cause-and-effect do not a good Spy vs. Spy game make."



Graffiti Kingdom

PlayStation 2

Developer: Taito

Publisher: Hot-B

Online: None

Available: April

5.5

Score

When a game's main character says "This is starting to get boring," as Graffiti Kingdom's Prince Pixel does on the game's second stage, it might be a sign that the game isn't quite living up to its potential. Despite the game's hook of being able to draw, customize and control any creature you desire (or transform into any of the game's baddies), GK's me-too platforming action takes place amidst some of the most generic level architecture seen on this generation of consoles. Creating monsters is a bit clumsy too, and the childish story is forgettable at best. As with similar games, the concept is good, but the execution needs to be more compelling. *C. Hoffman*



Predator: Concrete Jungle

PlayStation 2, Xbox

Developer: Eurocom

Publisher: VU Games

Online: None

Available: April

4.0

Score

You know something's wrong when you're one mission into a game and you're already a) fighting the camera for even the most basic movements, b) turned off by the deadening voice and dialogue, c) wondering if the enemies will continue to act this brainless and look this anemic in the proceeding settings and d) hoping that the level design will become more interesting. As it turns out, something indeed is wrong, and it doesn't stop with the initial complaints. There's a big list of moves and attacks, but you never find any worthwhile ways to use them as the game devolves into tiresome plough-ahead combat. *Brady Flechter*

Review Gallery



Raze's Hell

Xbox

Developer: Artech Studios Publisher: Majesco Online: 10p versus Available: April

6.5

Score

Kewtopia is a happy place where only cuteness exists. Its inhabitants are known as Kewletts, which look like the offspring of Care Bears and Pikmin. When it's time for war with outsiders who aren't as cute, these deranged creatures have no problem laying the smack down with weapons like the jack-in-the-box machine gun. In this rudimentary yet capable third-person action game, you assume the role of Raze, one of those ugly outsiders marked for extinction. He has a fun arsenal of destruction himself, so out you go across a colorful, marginally appealing world to destroy anything that moves—which poses a nice little challenge for those wanting a test. Thin humor does bring a few laughs to the satirical underpinnings. Not bad for 20 bucks. *Brady Flechter*

"...these deranged creatures have no problem laying the smack down with weapons like the jack-in-the-box machine gun."



Midnight Club 3: DUB Edition

PlayStation 2, Xbox

Dev: Rockstar San Diego Pub: Rockstar Online: 8p versus Available: April

8.5

Score

So the last edition of Midnight Club did it for you? Then Midnight Club 3: DUB Edition is going to blow you away. First up, you've got blinding speed, and more than enough distinct cars to tinker with to push that insane speed even harder. As standard as it may be, the extreme exaggeration that marks the arcade style is the whole idea, and when you start slipping into the proper use of power-ups to defy the aggressive AI, the adrenaline rush of competition is apoplectic. The city streets are typically open, offering several paths to sneak to the finish, and expand the structure for various modes of racing. Everything translates online, which is where you'll most likely spend most your time with this current champ of the street racing games. *Brady Flechter*



Stolen

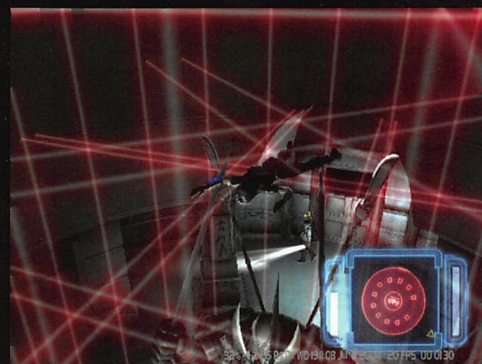
PlayStation 2, Xbox

Developer: Blue 52 Publisher: Hip Games Online: Friends, voice Available: April

7.0

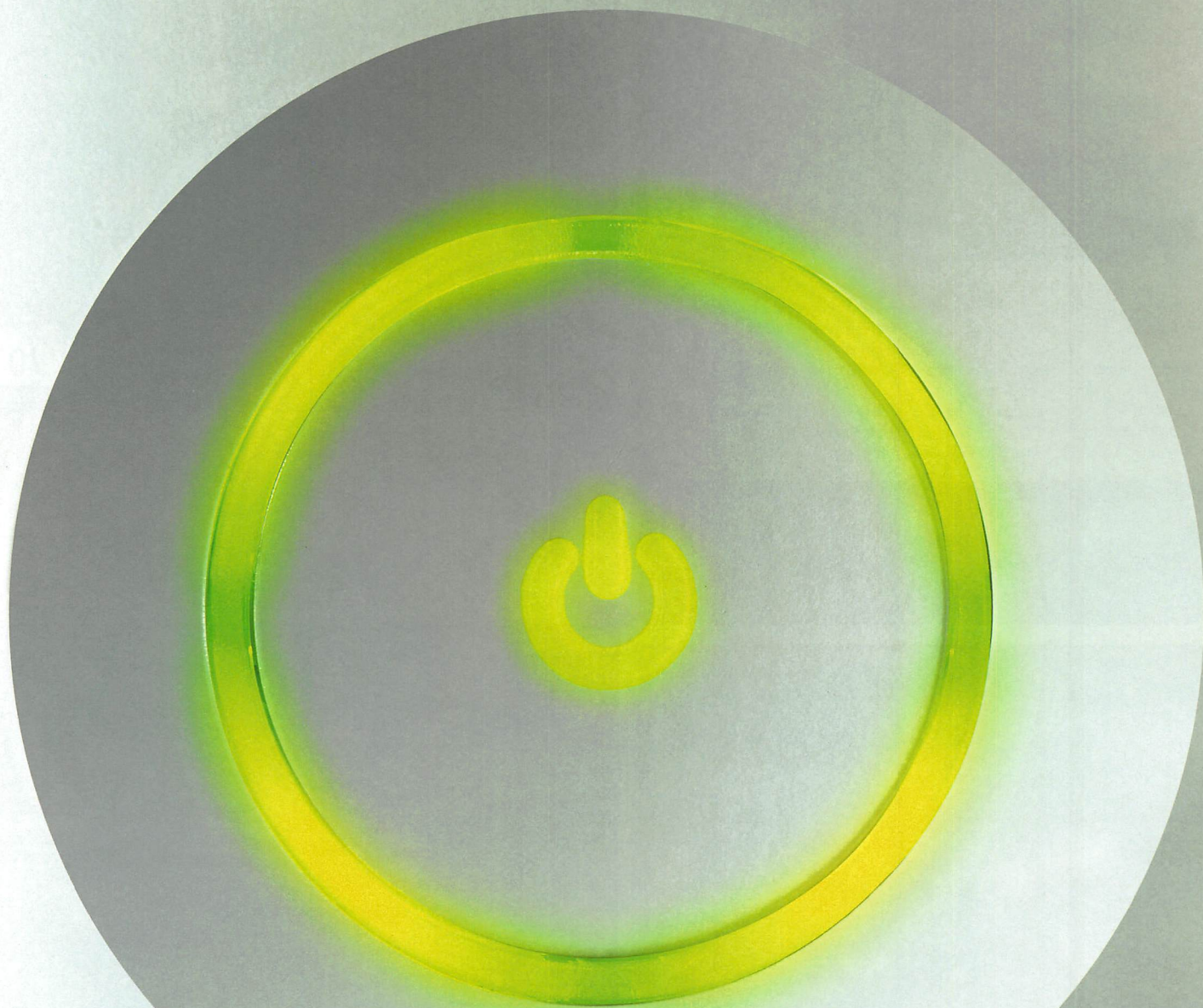
Score

Although it may be among the most unyielding stealth games ever conceived (the AI is wicked aware), *Stolen* is well worth tucking yourself away in a dark room for, especially if you've got nerves of steel and the patience of a saint. Anya Romanov is all about infiltration, theft and escape—zero casualties—and she has every conceivable tool (the Nullifier gun and sonar are most gratifying) to get the job done. Elsewhere, the focus is on nimble acrobatics—a cool hook that, because it's incited comes across as somewhat canned, but still it beats the usual duck-and-cover and sets the game apart. *Stolen* is big, pretty, very nicely produced and tailor-made for the enthusiast. If hardcore stealth is your game, satisfaction is guaranteed. *Dave Halverson*



"...*Stolen* is well worth tucking yourself away in a dark room for..."

FIRST LOOK



XBOX 360

Welcome to the next generation: round 1... Microsoft Game Studios comes full circle with their new and vastly improved entertainment console, the Xbox 360

I've never seen a more well-orchestrated hardware launch than the one Microsoft has laid out for their next box, the Xbox 360...well, at least not until our strictly embargoed system screens seeped onto the Internet three weeks early (curse you, Al Gore!), but hey, this is "official," right? Having made the transition from Genesis to Sega CD to 32X to Saturn and finally Dreamcast; SNES to N64 and on to GameCube; PS to PS2; and a few in between, no hardware manufacturer has ever primed the press as well, save for maybe Atari when they launched the Jaguar (seriously; they had half-naked cat-women crawling up our pants and handed us a console), and that organization and industry savvy is evident in every facet of the 360's young life: R&D, marketing, advertising and, yes, even software. No embargo, no strings and very few hoops to jump through, other than an early morning tram ride (think Umbrella Corp., only without the T-Virus) to Xbox HQ, and consequently the private work abodes of each key executive on the team, in order to get a first-hand account at the direction Microsoft Game Studios is headed, beginning with Home and Entertainment Division senior vice president, and Chief Xbox Officer, Robbie Bach, who, after introducing us to the massive MGS coffee station, spoke to us about the new strategy, along with some of the areas the group feels they need to improve. I don't particularly agree with everything—close though—Robbie had to say, but it's nice to have an open, honest dialogue with the guy pulling a good number of the strings. The decision to vacate the sports space I couldn't agree with more: That's a shark tank where the sharks ate the other sharks until there was one shark that we all hope meets a harpoon. The decision to develop fewer first-party titles and cut back on first-party studios, however, I'm not crazy about. Personally, I consider Gunvalkyrie, JSRF, Voodoo Vince, Blinx, Kingdom Under Fire, the orphaned Psychonauts and Oddworld: Stranger's Wrath, and the cancelled BC some of the best Xbox games available (or not). It's not the game's or developer's fault that Microsoft didn't make them household names, yet these are considered the black sheep of the family when they all underperformed for obvious reasons, be it timing, weak marketing, misguided press or a combination of factors. I think the answer is in better targeted campaigns and press coverage for these types of games, rather than eliminating them, hitting big with the press outlets who understand them while keeping them far away from those who don't... So on this we differ. It was certainly nice to express the opinion though. We want more first-party brands, but aside from Rare—the single word Robbie had to utter to shut me up—however, we're not going to see as many from internal Microsoft for the 360. The Halos and Fables of the world will certainly be priorities, but don't look for scores of games donning the MGS label.

In their defense, Microsoft's proposed support of third parties across the boards is far superior to what we're used to seeing, so creativity and fresh ideas should flourish. Through XNA—essentially the first direct first-party support system—Microsoft developers have open access to the latest tools and techniques during every stage of development, a vital component in the next-gen development process as building games becomes more complex. This will help erase the wide technology gap between first and third-party titles. Getting back to Rare, their multi-million dollar ace in the hole, that ship has yet to sail for Microsoft, but after witnessing what they're up to, I have to say they're launching an aircraft carrier. Kameo and Perfect Dark are jaw-droppingly beautiful-looking and playing; but, of course, the big question is what lies beyond, and how long we'll have to wait to get there. At four to five years a pop, it could be 2009 before we see the first non-Nintendo bred Rare offering, unless they surprise us at E3, which wouldn't surprise me a bit. Then again, I'm sure they could rustle up a Battletoads sequel in a couple years, so all those in favor... And, of course, there's the whole new take on Japan, which alone eclipses everything else in our eyes. Japan has and will always make the kinds of games we and our readers want to play, so news of their extensive outreach and resources there (see pg. 64) is really all we needed to hear. They had us at Sakaguchi.

Moving over to R&D—a rectangular think tank of a room filled with more top-secret prototypes covered in black than an aerospace lab—Xbox corporate vice president and Chief XNA Architect J Allard wore an ear-to-ear grin as he asked, "So, you wanna see it?" No, we came for the lovely Seattle weather... Whipping off the black shroud like David Copperfield, the Xbox 360 wasn't at all what we expected from the company that brought us the Japanese coffee table; but beyond the monolithic white guise, the functionality and brand integration is exemplary. It's called Xbox 360 for a reason, evident in every aspect of the "360" experience. The circle of light around the power node is linked directly to the

"...Microsoft's proposed support of third parties across the boards is far superior to what we're used to seeing, so creativity and fresh ideas should flourish."

The rings of light on the console and on the controller use different color schemes to communicate things to the player.



Note to couch potatoes: You can turn on your Xbox 360 from the sofa by using the Xbox Guide Button on the new (wireless!) controller.

Controller



illuminated outline of the controller orb, divided into quadrants that illuminate in different colors for any number of Live or single-player reasons...and in the instance you're crossing town to play at a friend's, each owning multiple systems or whatever, the hard drive clicks off and fits into a pocket. It's also wireless—no more controller cords or crap after-market wireless—and connected right out of the box. Plug it in and it's ready to serve.

What really took us aback, however, had to be the amount of R&D that went into all this design and functionality. The room was literally lined with early designs resembling everything from "rims" to simple white tiles and everything in between—the aftermath of a lengthy process orchestrated by Jonathan Hayes, an in-house designer and a sculptor who drove a collaborative effort between Hers in Osaka and Astro in San Francisco—bleeding-edge agencies from both sides of the pond. Not to mention massive tubs of pre-fab controllers, looking like so many bars of controller-shaped soap. Like it or not, the Xbox 360 design is the result of much ado between gamers, engineers, MGS, top agencies and probably the janitor.

"The room was literally lined with early designs resembling everything from 'rims' to simple white tiles and everything in between..."

Kameo: Elements of Power

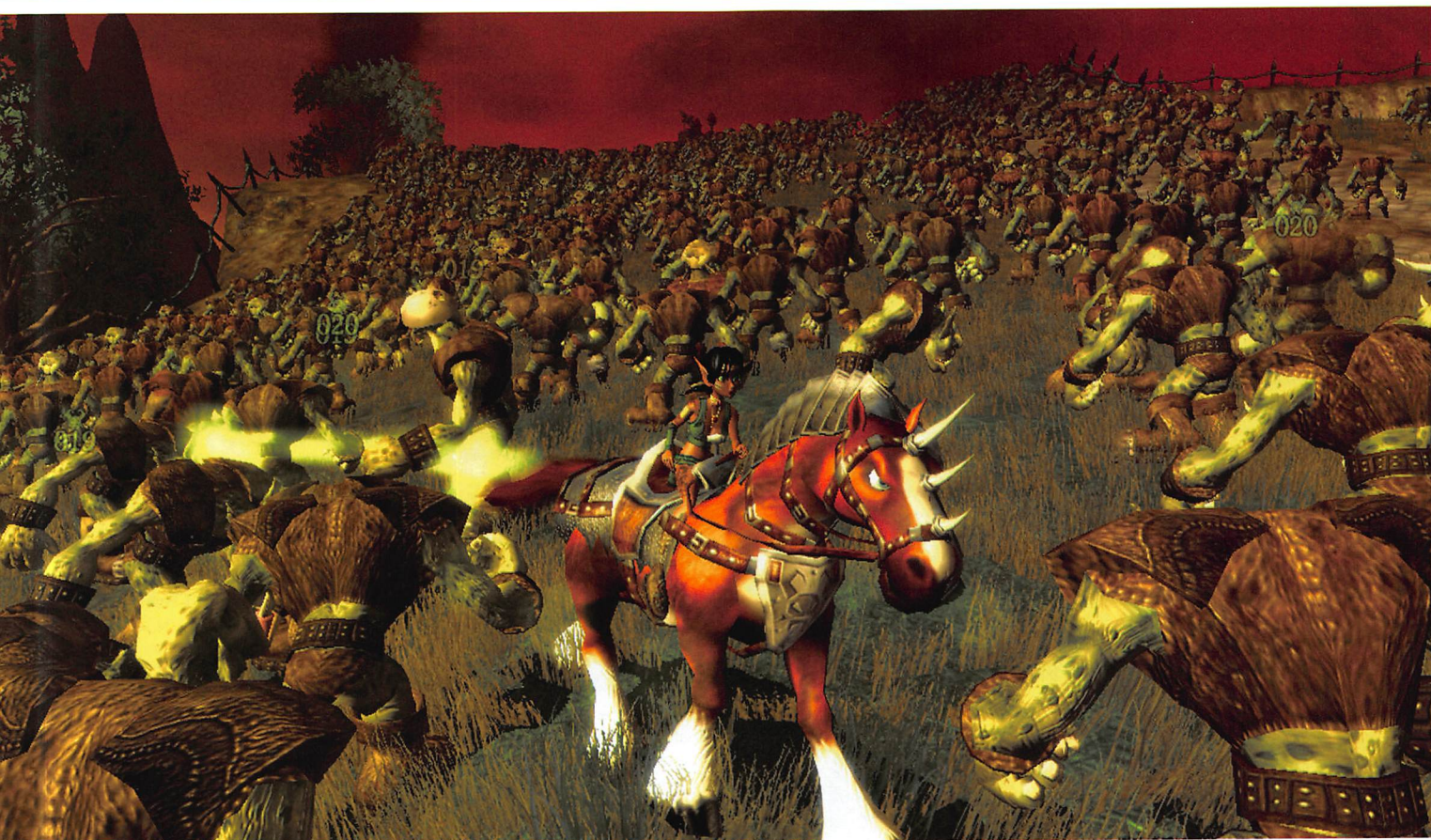
After jumping two consoles, Kameo (finally) finds a beautiful new home on Xbox 360.

Next up was Xbox General Manager Cam Ferroni and a trek through the vast cyber-wilderness of the 360's ground-breaking interface and communal aspects. Like Big Brother in a box, your Xbox 360 is designed to become a part of your life, like a TiVo with an inferiority complex, as it tracks your every move, from what rank player you are to how you behave online—information made available as you dart around Live looking for prospective matches. Let's say Fred from Orange County wants to join; you'll know he's a crap gamer whose claim to fame is beating T.H.U.G. 2 as the guy in the V8 wheelchair with one hand tied behind his back in a flash, so you can

continued...

Rare has begun the process of adding even more detail to Kameo's magnificent environments.





As amazing as this scene from Kameo looks here, playing it (or rather in it) is indescribable.



User Interface



What's on the menu? Try everything. A third USB 2.0 port (adjacent the Ethernet port) on the back of the console works with controllers, cameras, MP3 players, etc.

either flush him or welcome him into your cyber space. Whether you're a greenhorn who fancies fostering an orc to stand around chatting like a soccer mom or a rowdy annoying bastard of an online dictator, it's plain for all to see...but that's just the tip of a very big iceberg. It's a progressive scan

DVD player, you can receive hints and messages on the fly during gameplay, rip music to any game without affecting ancillary sound effects, shop for episodic content, maps, new weapons etc., or just sit around and try to get girls to show you their naughty bits. Your 360 produces high-speed, clear, *private* video. I see naked people...

While the vast majority of the 360's capabilities we welcome with open DSL lines (many of which are pictured left) it seems odd to have developers embedding game endemic achievements into every 360 game to be chronicled and stored in your personal data file like so many virtual trophies. I'm not one to boast about how awesome a gamer I am, and I'm not sure I want the world to know I bought every last outfit for Vanessa P. Schneider in P.N. 03. I'd rather just pop in a curious avatar and let people guess what kind of madman I've become. As long as all of these gizmos are optional, I say the more connectivity the better. Make it all things to all people, developer friendly and smaller than a Toyota and they will come.

And finally, to cap off the best field trip I'd been on since I felt up Lori Kearns at the Museum of Natural History in sixth grade, we were deposited in the grand Microsoft Game Studios conference room where our old friend Peter Moore demoed games for us (let me play Kameo too, no doubt in fear for his life) on a massive screen. A basketball demo from Visual Concepts might as well have been real; an excerpt from Ubi's upcoming Ghost Recon 3 was eerily realistic; and Epic's Gears of War gave us our first taste of massive, perfectly detailed, seamless creatures rampaging along in photo-realistically reactive environments...truly astonishing. What got me though, of course, was a scene from Kameo... What Rare is adding to boast the 360's specs is truly remarkable. Aside from yet another graphics pass, adding insane detail as far as the eye can see, riding her horse over a peak, there was a sea of orcs on a hillside—hundreds of them, all contained within a valley that looks from a dream. Kameo literally plows into them on horseback, splitting them as she fights her way through. Although the scene was still early, we're told each and every one will react in concert with the action. We're not in Kansas anymore.

The days of video game consoles merely playing games are over. They're soon to become the Mecca of home entertainment, housing our movies, music, music videos, memories, friends and acquaintances, and even who we are. Oh, and they play video games real good too...if anybody can find the time. Dave Halverson

"The days of video game consoles merely playing games are over. They're soon to become the Mecca of home entertainment, housing our movies, music, music videos, memories, friends and acquaintances, and even who we are."



Would you like to play a game? Other players can scope out your profile to see if you're naughty or nice.



Specs and hardware analysis

	XBOX	XBOX 360
CPU	Intel 733MHz Pentium III; one hardware thread	Custom-designed IBM PowerPC-based CPU with 3 Symmetrical cores running at 3.2 GHz each; 2 hardware threads per core and 6 hardware threads total
CPU Floating Point Performance	1,466 GFLOPS	115.2 GFLOPS
Graphics Processor	233 MHz custom-designed chip, developed by Microsoft and nVidia	500 MHz custom-designed chip, developed by Microsoft and ATI
Total Memory	64MB	512 MB GDDR3 RAM
Memory Bandwidth	— Main Memory: 6.4GB/sec — EDRAM rendering memory: N/A — Front Side Bus: 1 GB/s	— Main Memory: 22.4GB/sec — EDRAM rendering memory: 256GB/sec — Front Side Bus: 21.6 GB/sec
Polygon Performance	116.5 M/sec	500 M/sec
Simultaneous Textures	4	16 simultaneous textures, bilinear filtering
Pixel Fill Rate	3.7 G/Sec	16 G/Sec
Compressed Textures	Yes (6:1)	Yes, DXT1-5 + other more special purpose (including normal compression)
Built in Hard Disk	Yes	Detachable, upgradeable hard disk
I/O	— Game controller x4 — Ethernet (10/100)	— Wireless Game controller x4 — 3 USB 2.0 ports — 2 memory unit slots
Audio Channels	256	More than 256
DVD Movie playback	Remote control accessory required	Yes, built-in progressive scan
HDTV Game support	Yes	Yes
Maximum resolution	1920x1080	1920x1080
US Launch Date	November 2001	Not yet announced
Broadband enabled	Yes	— Instant, free access to Xbox Live features, including Xbox Live Marketplace for downloadable content, Gamer Profile for digital identity and Party Chat to talk to friends while playing games, watching movies or listening to music — Built in Ethernet Port — Wi-Fi Ready: 802.11 A, B and G — Video Camera Ready

"The ATI graphics system is, as expected, a shader and polygon-pushing beast. Objects can be layered with 16 texture types per rendering pass..."

The Xbox 360 specs look great, but how will they affect your next-gen gaming? Let's start in the heart with the three symmetrical cores, each cranking out 3.2 GHz: the beauty of this design is that it's essentially one big homogenous cluster of vector-enabled units. Once a core hands off data to a vector unit, it crunches through numbers and math very quickly. We're talking stuff like collision, physics and liquid simulation. Keeping track of these calculations was pretty costly in past hardware, but it's an area where the 360's hardware threads can perform magic—provided a developer taps into the threads.

Middleware is going to greatly simplify thread work for developers. Let's take NovodeX, for example—the physics solution built into Epic's Unreal Engine 3. Epic chose NovodeX because it's the only physics package with full hardware thread support. Now, about the 360's six hardware threads: imagine preparing a presentation, and you have six assistants helping instead of one, and they're all the same skill level and they can all meet the same schedules. So you assign your physics to one of these assistants, your AI to another, maybe some network code to another if you have big Xbox Live features, and so forth. Using tools and experimentation, developers will hand out tasks to these threads and the cores will munch through each task in parallel. In basic terms, and besides inherent gains from much faster clock speeds, you could

theoretically have the Xbox 360 doing six times as many critical game tasks at any given millisecond where the Xbox would still be working on one. When the elite engine builders of gaming—like Bungie, Rare and Tecmo—get fully acquainted with programming for threads, the level of raw interactivity and world simulation will be staggering.

The ATI graphics system is, as expected, a shader and polygon-pushing beast. Objects can be layered with 16 texture types per rendering pass, as opposed to the Xbox's four. Combine this with a huge pipeline for shading effects and compression for normal maps, and this system can produce visuals in the vein of Doom 3 or Riddick with more detailed models, softer shadows, vastly superior lighting and deeper, more accurate textures. The ATI solution will also include multi-sample anti-aliasing (MSAA). Think of all those jagged and broken lines along the edges of game objects plaguing current consoles. MSAA pulls a blend of color samples from the surrounding triangle, essentially filling in the gaps, to get rid of those artifacts.

The final core spec that is thrilling developers is memory. With eight times the RAM of the Xbox to work with, every aspect of a game can be bumped up: average texture size, simultaneous characters and objects, and seamless environment transitions. The Xbox 360 also has a ton of amazingly complementary components for DVD playback, online gameplay and expandability. **Mike Griffin**

XBOX 360

The Plan in Japan

Plan B is rock solid

Mike Fischer has been a prominent figure in the games business for well over a decade, including key roles at Namco and Sega before making the transition to Microsoft, where he now heads up the Xbox 360 efforts in Japan...

Interview

Mike Fischer, Director of Marketing, Xbox Japan

play: It's no big secret that the first time around Xbox didn't hit big in Japan. It's also obvious why, as MGS didn't really set out to. The Xbox was the size of a Japanese coffee table and there was no time to ramp up. This time around, however, with you in Japan and Peter here in the U.S., the stage is set for a major run at the Japanese market and hopefully the U.S. crossover we (in the USA) so desperately need. What is the single biggest challenge facing you in signing partners for Xbox 360?

Mike Fischer: We've learned a lot of lessons from our work in Japan. We had missteps that we won't repeat. Our first design was not reflective of the Japanese culture, and we now have a sleek, elegant console ID that was driven in large part by a design team in Japan. Most significantly, we have committed a great deal of resources to getting tremendous Japanese talent like Sakaguchi-san, Mizuguchi-san and Okamoto-san on board to create epic games that will appeal to gamers around the world and especially in the Japanese market.

What will be the killer app there for Xbox 360 at launch?

We are confident that all the titles we are building here at MGS in Japan will be killer apps—they are big projects with big vision behind them. We haven't announced our launch lineup from Japan yet, but you can expect to see incredible new versions of classic Japanese franchises as well as some all-new breakthrough titles. And although we will have more made-in-Japan content than ever before for our market, we believe our MGS franchises like Perfect Dark Zero



and Project Gotham Racing will also make a big impact here.

Can you give us a taste of what games might be available around launch and notable developers/publishers currently working on titles?

We already have the big players on board in Japan like never before. Namco, Capcom, Sega, Konami, Koei and many, many more. It's a whole different world this time around.

The Sakaguchi announcement was a major one—the type of union that can turn the tides. How long a process was the negotiation?

The decision on both sides was a swift one. Once we outlined our vision for the next generation, Sakaguchi-san couldn't wait to be on board.

What is he like to work with? Is he excited to be setting out on a brand new fantasy? ...If he makes an MMO, I'm going out the window.

More than anything else, Sakaguchi-san is a great storyteller, and he has many, many stories left to tell. Although fantasy is the genre where he has made his biggest mark, it would be counting him out to think that he is limited to just one style. The great thing about working with Sakaguchi-san is the breadth of his experience, which allows him to lend his perspective and advice to a lot of what we are doing here in Japan.

...I just opened the window. Reminds me of when Square left Nintendo for Sony. That really marked a changing of the guard. Does Square still command that kind of power in Japan? Are you negotiating for any Square-Enix titles to appear on Xbox 360? Think we'll ever see a multi-console Final Fantasy?

We respect Square-Enix as a publisher and feel that the company has an amazing portfolio that has proven to be influential on both sides of the Pacific. We don't want to speculate on the future of other companies, but would love to see a Final Fantasy appear on our platform.

Do you also consult with each company you deal with on what type of game to develop to get a hit here? Do they see America now as the primary marketplace?

We have a collaborative relationship with all of our developers and publishers, and we discuss together what sort of content we think will be the best fit. Ultimately, our third-party publishers are independent companies that make their own decisions, and we are very happy with the games they have coming to our platform. With regard to the developers of our MGS games in Japan, it is their passion that makes games great, and I have tremendous respect for their creative vision. The market is more global than ever before, and while some games are definitely made with the Japanese domestic market first, others have a more worldwide focus.

If you were to preface Microsoft's long-term goal for Japan, what would it be?

We simply want to provide content that Japanese gamers consider the absolute best. Microsoft is committed to delivering the best content and best portfolio of titles to gamers around the world, and Japan is on the top of this list. We realize the importance and impact



Two more reasons why the Xbox 360 will succeed in Japan. Oh, and Mike of course.

that Japan has on gamers around the world, and we would like to establish ourselves as a dominant force in the overseas market.

Are the Japanese as excited as we are here about the next generation of hardware? I know traditionally they don't take to new hardware so swiftly.

Are you nuts!? This is the land of the hurricane-speed trend, and every time I go down to Akihabara I am amazed at breakthrough new products I see. This is heaven for the ultimate "early adopter" in both games and technology.

To answer your question, yes, I am nuts, but I was speaking on a mass level. What is the current magic pill for Japanese brand loyalty? For the longest time they were a Nintendo society, then slowly Sony crept in... Is the RPG still king in Japan?

You don't get anywhere without great games. The beauty of the Japanese market is that it provides the perfect environment to foster something that is truly unique and innovative. Games that would be out of place in America, such as Tecmo's Gallop Racer, are huge hits across the sea. It's tough to comprehend

"The great thing about working with Sakaguchi-san is the breadth of his experience, which allows him to lend his perspective and advice to a lot of what we are doing here in Japan."

why games like this sell so well in Japan but struggle to break through in America. For this we've established elite partnerships with the industry's brightest luminaries to find what you call "the magic pill." We have developed some pretty strong ties to the Japanese community and feel that it will be beneficial for us in the long run.

Do you think the connectivity of Xbox 360 might signal a lean in your direction? It seems tailor-made for the Japanese lifestyle.

Japan's high rates of broadband access and the incredibly fast connection speeds definitely give us an advantage here, but connectivity isn't just part of the Japanese lifestyle; it's part of the world's lifestyle. Each day, more and more families are looking for products that can co-exist with their pre-existing products. PCs are more functional now with the advent of PVRs, and iPods are a fixture of societies across the world.

The communal aspects of the machine are pretty revolutionary... Think it'll be a big selling point over there? Are the developers okay with inserting merit badges into their games?

Gamers everywhere want to be able to show off their accomplishments, and we're giving them an easier method of doing so. Instead of having a gamer tell his friends that he put 20 hours into Project Gotham Racing, someone can just look up his Gamertag and have that information at their fingertips. I also think the ability to choose the people with whom you play is a big help in Japan, where hyper-aggressive, English-speaking players can be intimidating. Xbox Live will now allow you the choice to select players who speak your own language, play at your own level, and have your own playing style. This creates a much easier environment for getting started in any gaming community.

What about the game culture there on the whole? Has it changed much over the past decade? I bet you can still find Air Zonk in a bargain bin in Akihabara... We suck. Can I come live with you?

I don't have too much extra space in my apartment for an editor, but do you give good foot massages? That might tip the scales. Seriously, Japan has led the world in understanding that gaming culture is mass-market pop culture. When Hironobu Sakaguchi announced his support of Xbox, it made the front page of national newspapers. People like Sakaguchi, Mizuguchi and Okamoto are respected not only as gaming gods, but as great entertainment creators—just like a movie director or novelist. It is nice to see the work we do in our industry get the respect it deserves. The rest of the world is starting to get the picture, though.

Microsoft worked very closely with Sega on Xbox and produced three of the finest games of their day—JSRF, Panzer Dragoon Orta and Gunvalkyrie—yet the Xbox was

very new here and the marketing nil so they fell on deaf ears. Is Sega a big part of the 360 launch?

Yes, Sega is very much a part of our launch plans. In fact, "big" and "launch" are two very key words in your question. We've established partnerships with the industry's heavy-hitters to create content for us in the next generation.

What about Blinx? Has Ohshima given up on his cat extravaganza or will he enjoy a third life on Xbox 360? Has the title performed in Japan? It's a great series but critters don't seem to gel here as they once did (sadly).

We love Blinx and the games that Ohshima-san has created, but we have not made any announcements regarding a next-generation Blinx.

Are any developers considering arming their platformers with edgier heroes? Japan has always turned out epic adventures, but fur bearin' critters have passed their sell-by date. Apparently the hip-hop community has put something in the water. We need edgy platforming heroes! Is Microsoft still working with Artoon? They're a fantastic team...

We're walking a fine balance between furry creatures and edgier heroes. Take Conker, for example; when you look at him, he looks like a furry and cuddly little creature. Then he opens his mouth and you realize that he's a disgusting yet loveable bastard. We're striving to develop more characters like Conker who have personality and panache.

Speaking of fantastic...Kingdom Under Fire was amazing. Are you managing the Korean scene as well? Now there's a game that would be insane on Xbox 360...

We have nothing to discuss at this time.

What about working with Treasure? They're the Rare equivalent in Japan, yet they continue to work on smaller projects.

You are asking a guy who is still a fan of Treasure's McDonald's game. And while we respect Treasure as one of the premier Japanese publishers, we have no plans to acquire their services at this time.

Why has every next-gen Castlevania appeared on a Sony system? Is Konami locked up for the long haul? Have you met with them?

As evidenced by our portfolio, we have a strong working relationship with Konami. We would welcome Castlevania to our platform, but the decision is Konami's.

What about brands like Viewtiful Joe and Devil May Cry? Is it also a part of your function in Japan to try and get these brands onto Xbox?

Capcom is already committed to supporting Xbox and is a valuable publishing partner. We are always talking to our partners about the best way to bring their content to our platform, but at the end of the day, they make their own decisions.

Do Japanese developers work, for the most part, on tighter deadlines with smaller teams and budgets?

It really depends on the project. You see a lot of quirky low-budget games in here, but you also see massive RPGs. So there is an enormous variety of approaches to the market here. Gamers here still give as much attention to small, innovative games as to big epics, and that frees developers from the one-way path of constant escalating scale—if they choose.

Are there philosophical differences in the way the Japanese make games compared to Americans and Europeans these days?

For certain, there are philosophical differences between the various regions, but that doesn't mean that the goal isn't the same. Ultimately, companies produce games to bring new and exciting experiences to their audiences. Game creators everywhere take their work seriously, but there definitely is a respect given to the creators and the creative process here that may still be ahead of the rest of the world.

"Japan's high rates of broadband access and the incredibly fast connection speeds definitely give us an advantage..."

Ninety-Nine Nights

The first shot from abroad: Mizuguchi-san's next-generation Xbox game, *Ninety-Nine Nights*—scheduled for release in Japan and, most assuredly soon after, America.



Condemned: Criminal Origins

Sega comes out of the gate smokin'

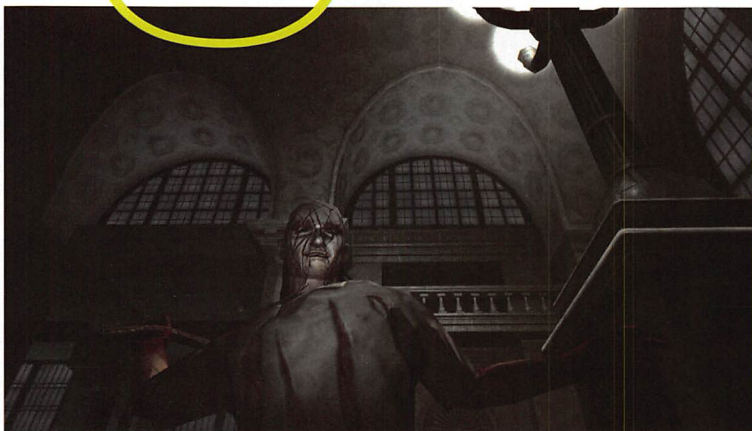


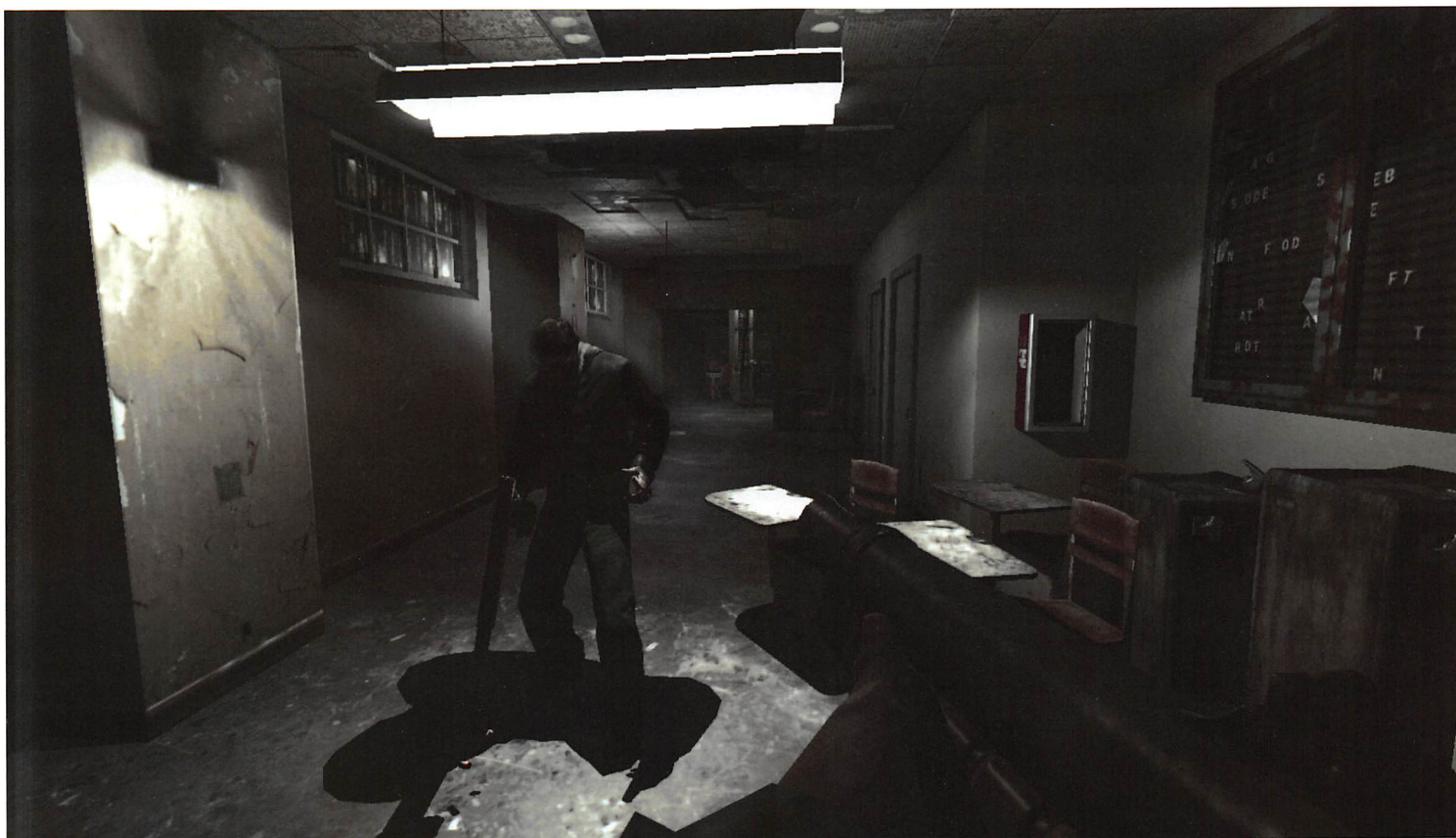
Some believe we are born evil and there's no way to completely bury our darkest sin. Some believe our soul is inherently pure, tainted by the perils of existence to become evil. Others argue evil doesn't exist at all, that we choose to either obey our conscience or we don't. Perhaps we can all agree evil is intriguing, and to be a little evil in a virtual world can be empowering.

And how about a virtual world that explores motivation for the evil it contains? According to its makers, *Condemned* is a game that is seriously concerned with implication and emotion, posing the question in its story: what forces a killer to kill?

In this psychologically wound first-person adventure, you play through the eyes of FBI agent Ethan Thomas, who is out to track down the most brutal murderers known to man. This isn't meant to be a balls-out action game, driven by tons of pickups and high-powered weapons at the ready to mow down cities full of resistance. You're on a vulnerable quest of discovery and fear, locating forensic clues and collecting information while you deal with the serial killers who lurk in the shadowy urban landscape.

The action is heavy on melee combat. A pipe entertainingly ripped off a wall may become your only means of offense, and swinging such





"Now that developers have this newfound power in their hands, there will certainly be some new approaches taken to the creation of their worlds..."

a blunt object around takes brutality to the next level. Firearms can be used, but once you've run out of limited bullets, the weapon becomes a bludgeoning tool until it falls apart; watching the character pulverize charging foes with his crude weapon of necessity was startling. Chalk the impact up to the Xbox 360's advanced technical capabilities, or chalk it up to keen design; either way, they're on to something intense.

Now that developers have this newfound power in their hands, there will certainly be some new approaches taken to the creation of their worlds outside of the nuts and bolts of actually coding a geometrical space. For *Condemned*, the designers wanted to devise a place that was entirely made up, yet held a real-world feel that went beyond the usual artifice of plastic sets and contrived blocks. So they hired the location scout from *The Ring* to come up with compelling architectural ideas that could more organically translate to the *Condemned* world.

With the designs in place, advanced lighting routines give the setting I saw amazing dimension, and when you add in physics to even the more minute objects, everything becomes disarming in its conviction as an

actual place. There was one instance where a killer got trapped in a corner office, sending a hanging florescent lamp careening as it cast its light into every edge of the room, providing multiple shadow points that really must be seen to be appreciated. Seconds later, a brute comes charging through a narrow space, knocking over equipment and shattering glass in a side window with his errant fist. When you witness this unscripted, playing out in response to your actions in a world that looks alive and aware, the intrigue of tasting that evil is getting weirdly closer. I have no idea what to expect from this game as a whole, and it's obvious we're all thrilled at the sight of new technology at work, but what I do know is that *Condemned* is the most interesting prospect I've seen on Xbox 360. Brady Flechter

Condemned: Criminal Origins

Xbox 360, PC

Point of Interest

Since the game isn't a shooter, there's no weapon inventory.

Developer: Monolith Publisher: Sega

Online: TBA Available: Launch



Not bad for the first generation, eh?



Full Auto

Don't just race it, fully destroy it

Sega would like you to believe that Full Auto contains "the most destructive racing action ever experienced in a video game." I'm not about to argue that pitch. If driving stupidly fast with total disregard for the safety of every solid object in your path sounds appealing, here's the virtual automotive demolition simulator to make your day a little brighter.

Before you can wreck stuff and blow it up, you have to pick a car that suits your destructive tastes. This isn't some rules-driven, hardcore driving simulation, which explains why your ride is beefed up with mounted cannons and other forms of artillery. These weapons provide more than the ability to merely rip apart fellow racers with direct impact, joining your vehicle itself as a massive scenery-destroying wrecking ball. Pretty much anything goes: fire into the side of a building, knocking down a sign with falling debris that crumbles into a gas station that blows sky high, taking out an overpass that happens to have vehicles crossing that add to the fireball that rips apart surrounding trees and concrete. The world is set up as a truly reactive physics-based space, so chain reactions come down

to the displacement of the impact zone, and there will never—that's right, never—be the same wreck twice. And when you do annihilate the surroundings, the damage shows up on the cars as well, with fun little details emerging like a spare tire rolling around the newly exposed trunk. Goodbye predetermined animations, hello Xbox 360.

The game takes place in the near future, where a naughty group called The Shepherds is putting a crime-driven hold on the city of Staunton. You agree to compete in a series of races—as many as 60 in the Career Mode, which branches off into other modes like Pursuit, Arena Tag and a handful of side games. The streets have a fairly defined racing path, but shortcuts open the need for more than straight-ahead mayhem. If you miss an entry point or get screwed by another racer, one of Full Auto's central features, called "unwreck," gives you the ability to briefly rewind the action and jump back into prime position. Of course, all this and more can be captured and replayed, on the fly if you like, and it goes without saying, now that the 360 is in town, full online support is on its way. Brady Flechter



Full Auto

Xbox 360

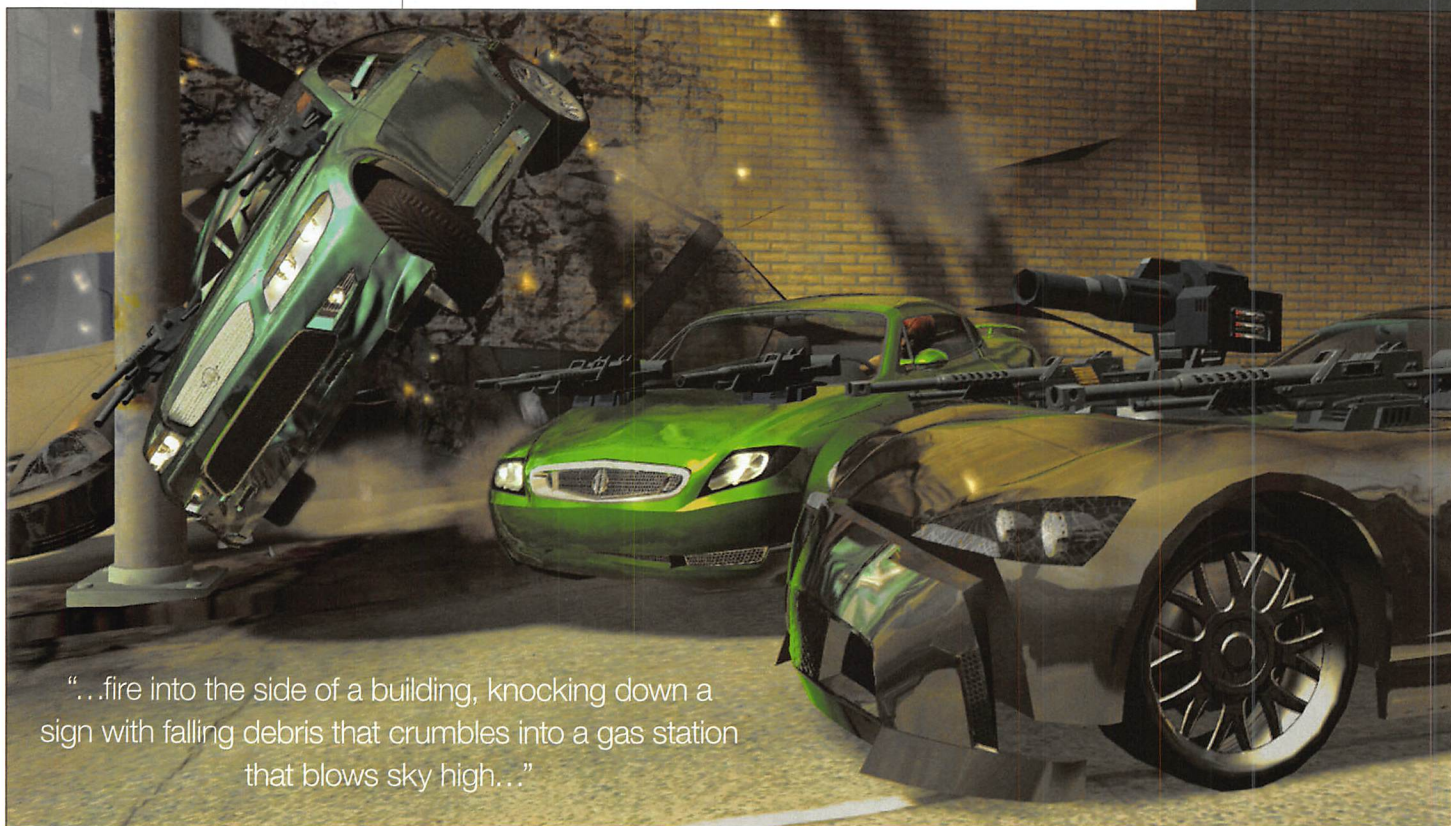
Point of Interest

You'll never witness any canned crash animations.

Developer: Pseudo Interactive Publisher: Sega

Online: Yes, details TBA Available: Launch

Be kind, rewind.

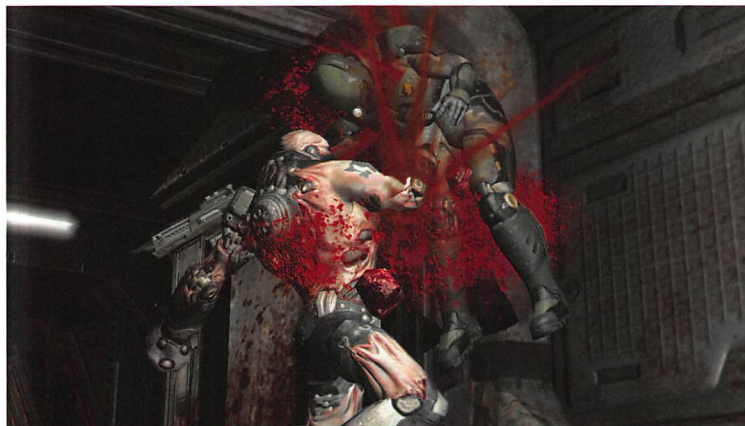


"...fire into the side of a building, knocking down a sign with falling debris that crumbles into a gas station that blows sky high..."

Quake IV

Developer: Id Publisher: Activision

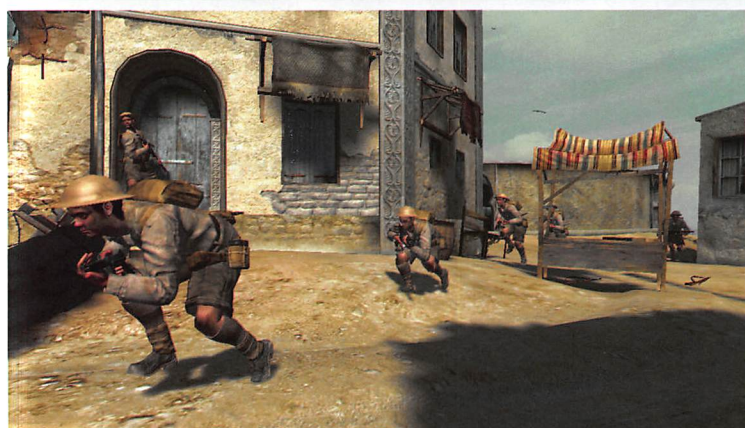
And we thought tri-linear
mip-mapped interpolation
was cool...



Call of Duty 2

Developer: Infinity Ward Publisher: Activision

With Xbox 360, the war comes
to you. Lock and load and let the
bodies hit the floor.



Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion

Developer: Bethesda Game Studios Publisher: Bethesda Softworks

Oblivion rears its
beautifully ugly
head on Xbox 360.



Ghost Recon 3

Developer: Ubisoft Publisher: Ubisoft

Team warfare
so real you might wanna
bring along a body bag.



Preview

Dungeons and Dragons Online

D&D plants its roots in persistent online soil

The interactive RPG structure that D&D introduced more than three decades ago can be seen throughout the MMO genre today, but the first and only true representation of Dungeons and Dragons in the persistent online space is coming our way this fall courtesy of Turbine and Atari. Eschewing clumsy turn-based combat and experience grinding in favor of a pseudo-action-RPG flavor with customized dungeons and interactive environments, D&D Online lead designer Ken Troop and his team are under a lot of internal pressure to capture as many types of gamers as possible while remaining true to the storied RPG

license. Working with an advanced third-generation internal engine and full Havok physics, Ken describes the intricacies of merging D&D Online's classes and questing with an interactive dungeon combat experience... **Mike Griffin**

Dungeons and Dragons Online

PC

Point of Interest

Turbine makes good use of new combat tactics offered in D&D 3.5 edition.

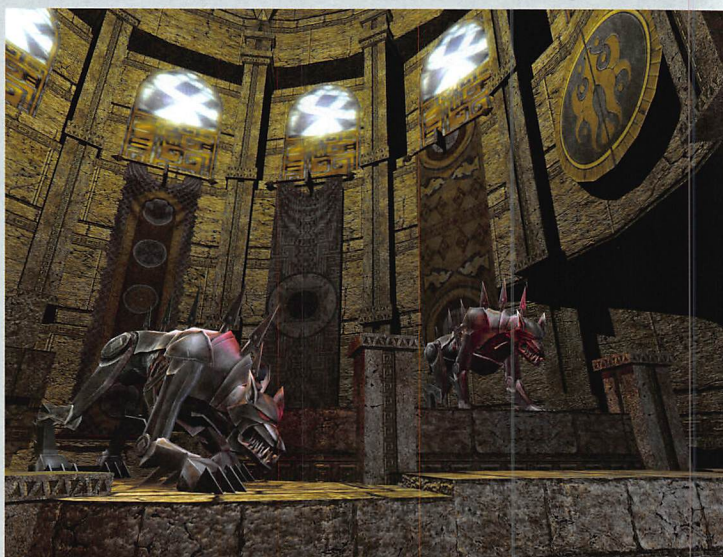
Developer: Turbine Publisher: Atari

Online: Massively Multiplayer Available: Fall 2005



"...a pseudo-action-RPG flavor with customized dungeons and interactive environments..."

Being over-encumbered with items slowly begins to affect skills and movement, and these Iron Defenders run very fast...



Interview

Ken Troop, lead designer, Turbine



play: How did you adapt the D&D melee and caster roles to the game's combat system?

Ken Troop: It was really important to us to capture that heart of D&D, which is really about those roles having a substantial weight to them that distinguishes them. So we started with the melee classes at first because we prototyped the combat system based off of melee combat. We

got the fighters, barbarians and paladins in order. From there we started analyzing the wizards, clerics and the spell-casting classes, just to see how they compared in terms of overall power. Ultimately, one of the ways in which we deviated a bit from D&D—working with Wizards of the Coast, the license holders—is we've implemented a system that allows spell casters to cast a lot more often than they

do in pen and paper. We were noticing that the melee were up there having a great time, slashing and hacking away, but the wizards could cast maybe four or five spells, then they were done. So we added a system that allows the wizards to keep pace with their melee brethren.

Is combat in D&D Online based on small- or large-scale battles?

Generally, the combat in DDO is more suited towards coming across a lot of monsters and getting rid of those monsters very quickly. There are a lot of area of effect-type spells, and melees are just generally able to work through a lot of monsters quickly, so the emphasis is more on the macro aspects of combat as opposed to the micro aspects. With the pen-and-paper game, you're really only

going to have like two or three combats in a session, and your efficacy is based on how well you do with those two or three micro-encounters. In D&D Online, it's more on the macro-level of the dungeon; overall, how successful you are at minimizing the damage you're taking while fighting through hordes of monsters in a given dungeon.

Do casters and melees lock on to enemies, or is it all about skilled aiming and attacking?

We found it just wasn't as much fun as far as everything that happens with aiming, especially long distance, so one of the things we had to do for casters is give them the ability to lock on to targets. They can also freely launch spells like the area of effect stuff. Melees also have the option



With no passive regeneration of hit points or spell points inside a dungeon, you'll have to use items, spells and potions to restore your basic stats.



Win Conditions and Checkpoints

At its base level, every dungeon has a win metric: this may include killing a boss monster, interacting with a certain object or eliminating all the creatures in the dungeon. Regardless of the win conditions, there are rest camps in each dungeon where you can heal up, resurrect or regain spell points and abilities. The rest camp also allows you to save an experience checkpoint: you guarantee yourself whatever amount of experience you've earned so far in the dungeon, so if your party wipes out or gives up, you've already banked a reward.

of locking on or just clicking at whatever's in front of their camera and that's what they'll swing at to try and connect. The main difference when you're locked on is you don't have to worry about some of the positional or movement stuff, and when you aren't locked on, it's completely in your control, so the more experience you have with the game's controls...a lot of those players find it easier to not lock on. If you're just starting with the game, you could probably use the lock-on to good effect. We wanted to make sure that no matter what your level of comfort with twitch controls, the combat would engage and demand your attention.

Will D&D Online be solo friendly?

You're not really meant, in Dungeons and Dragons, to succeed in all types of encounters as *just* the fighter or wizard. So we put a lot of emphasis on the group play of the game and the ease of finding a group or having a group find you. There are some dungeons that exist for up to, let's say, 15 random people, to come in and share the instance—but they don't have to know each other and they don't have to party up. There may be some side benefits that you'll only have access to with, for example, a rogue in your party...

How is the D&D ruleset applied to your character's core actions?

Even though it's a faster-paced and more action-oriented game, we really wanted to make sure that it had, at its core, the D&D numbers. So, for example: in order to tumble around, you have to pour some points into Tumble, and the more points you put into the Tumble skill, the more effective you are at rolling around and recovering from rolls. For shields, there's no auto-block; you have to hold down your block key, but then your effectiveness of blocking is determined in large part by your numbers. There are also some pure stat-based elements, such as armor class and saving throws, all of which affect you in combat. For casters, it's pretty much straight out of the D&D ruleset, in terms of how effective your spells are.

How is the D&D ruleset applied to gaining new spells, skills, or feats?

For the most part, we're following the straight D&D progression system, so that when you would normally get a spell, skill or feat in D&D pen and paper, you'd get the same in D&D Online.

Can players take advantage of elevation and terrain in dungeons?

We really emphasize elevation in our game, but more so in the straightforward way that it's easier to rain magic, or set up an ambush, or face an enemy from above than if you were up close and personal. Because we're not giving out experience per kill—everything is based on beating the dungeon or optional objectives—we're a lot more relaxed about situations where you can ambush or exploit the monsters in order to achieve victory. Also, because we're instancing all this space, you can set up traps, break bridges and floors, and just basically inalterably change the very layout of the dungeon as you're traversing it. You can use all of these interactive possibilities against the monsters themselves. So, for example,

there are certain elements of the dungeon that are random. For example, we can change up the monster placement and, to some degree, the monster difficulty and treasure placement. In certain cases, we want to do stuff statically, non-randomly, so players can learn and parse what a given dungeon experience is, and in other cases we mix it up so players have a different experience every time. Sometimes getting a dungeon down pat can be a very fun and challenging road—where you've done the dungeon enough times, and there are enough static elements in it, that you become a master. In other dungeons, we want to provide a lot of variety so it's a fresh experience—a change of pace—each time.

Will D&D Online have critical quests based on an evolving storyline?

Some of our dungeons are more intrinsically related to the back story and setting of the game. So in that sense, we have a number of quests in the game, some of which involve a series of win conditions ultimately formed in the frame of a quest. There's also longer arcs, what

"...because we're instancing all this space, you can set up traps, break bridges and floors, and just basically inalterably change the very layout of the dungeon as you're traversing it."

Ken Troop, lead designer, Turbine

you can have monsters pursuing you and lead them across a trap, and someone else is waiting to hit the trap just as the monsters cross it. One group of players might approach the dungeon with the idea of killing all the monsters and say, "Hey, we don't want to run into that blade trap," while another group will say, "We can figure out a way to get that blade to fall right in the midst of a group of monsters, thereby doing most of the damage for us."

How much is randomly generated in an instance?

We actually pre-set the overall shell—the geometrical structure—of a dungeon, but

we're calling Story Quests, and these are usually aggregations of these dungeon win quests, or they're just overall epic quests that involve many NPCs, dungeon exploration and completing adventures in a certain way.

Turbine will enjoy a comfortable partnership with Wizards of the Coast going forward. In fact, Wizards has already incorporated several of Turbine's all-new creature designs into the next edition of the Eberron sourcebook for use with the pen-and-paper D&D game. We'll see how D&D Online shapes up for E3 this month.



Multi-Classing

With a total of nine base classes, D&D Online will also let you multi-class up to three classes. Similar to the pen and paper D&D, however, it's really not that efficient to multi-class if you're planning to min-max your character. To some degree, player skill obviates the traditional multi-class penalty—spreading your character too thin, as it were—and you will probably be a more effective multi-classer in D&D Online as a result.



Crowd Control

Although D&D Online encourages large-scale area of effect destruction in lieu of slow "pick-and-choose" MMO combat standards, spell casters will still have access to a number of crowd control abilities. These include Charm Person, Hold, and more potent options at higher levels to give excessively troublesome beasts a "Time-Out."

Preview

Guild Wars

Breaking the massively multiplayer mold

Launching simultaneously in North America, Europe and Australia, Guild Wars has started a campaign that is changing the way people think about MMOs. ArenaNet has tackled solo play, group play, guild play, shared world space, privately spawned world space, strategic small-scale quests and epic world-spanning competitive quests. All this, and there's no monthly subscription fee. We spoke with ArenaNet co-founder Jeff Strain on the cusp of GW's

deployment, looking back at development and ahead at future plans for the title.

Mike Griffin

Guild Wars

PC

Point of Interest
Each ability in Guild Wars, regardless of level, has an equivalent countermeasure.

Developer: ArenaNet **Publisher:** NCsoft
Online: Massively multiplayer **Available:** April

Interview

Jeff Strain, lead programmer, Guild Wars

play: With Guild Wars' release upon us, you have a chance to review the development process. What were some of the biggest hurdles in making this game?

Jeff Strain: The hurdles we faced that come to mind are the ones where the solution added a tremendous amount to the game itself. For example, the day the bloom lighting went in, the Guild Wars world suddenly became real. Before that, we had a beautiful, functional game environment. But after the bloom was turned on, Tyria became a place you wanted to travel to. Interaction with the environment was also an interesting challenge. With a multiplayer game, you can't predict when events will be triggered or the locations or viewing angles of all eight members of a party—or all 100+ residents of a town. The presentation of large events, like bridges collapsing, yaks stampeding, avalanches, etc., has to be completely airtight. There is no cheating on our end. We had to create a world that could be viewed from every possible location.

And the skill system as well...we planned from the very beginning to give players a huge number of choices, and we did that: we're now over 450 skills in this first release. We have guild-versus-guild, player-versus-player and even world-versus-world competition in Guild Wars. That sort of environment demands an even playing field. We've worked night and day to balance out the skills and the professions...the gameplay has been scrutinized and re-scrutinized. In the end, it was getting over this hurdle

that has made Guild Wars as much fun to play as it is.

Let's look ahead now. What sort of plans do you have for between-chapter content additions?

Our streaming technology lets us provide updates on a more granular level, so players won't have to deal with once-a-month 30-megabyte updates. Instead, look for a more organic, consistent flow of new content into the game. We will have a full-time live team working solely on adding new content to the existing game on a regular basis. It's going to be an evolving, ever-changing world.

There's certainly one way that Guild Wars players can create their own fun, and that's with ladder-based competition. You have several instanced areas designed to test guilds, but how are you going to connect players worldwide?

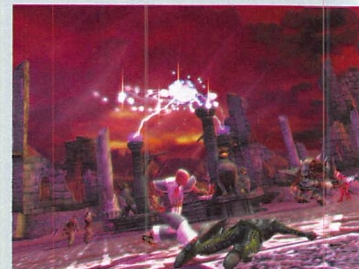
In addition to the guild-versus-guild combat, players will also be able to test their mettle in the Tomb of the Primeval Kings. Here, teams compete against all others on a worldwide basis. Within the world of Tyria, there are several reserved, veteran levels that are unavailable to most players. The only way to get to them is by winning the Hall of Heroes, the top level of the Tomb of the Primeval Kings. This is our Worlds at War feature, and it will be available 24 hours a day, seven days a week. If, for instance, your account is in the European World, and your team



"...the day the bloom lighting went in, the Guild Wars world suddenly became real."

Jeff Strain, lead programmer, Guild Wars

enters the International Tournament in the Tombs, you will, in effect, be playing for the glory of all those in your World. Win the tournament and everyone in your entire world will gain the ability to access these elite levels. In addition, you can expect to see us continually roll out new features to support the international competitive nature of the game. We have plans for some very large, very high profile international tournaments. Stay tuned for the details. **play**



The ubiquitous bloom and vibrant colors lend the world of Tyria an ethereal quality.

Preview

Call of Duty 2

The sequel to the best WW2 shooter raises the bar

Call of Duty 2 is the smoking-hot sequel to the now-classic Activision and Infinity Ward WW2 shooter from 2003. Set to appear on PC later this year, CoD 2 will follow the campaigns of soldiers fighting in concert against the enemy from 1941 to 1945. Not satisfied with laying claim to the best WW2 title, Infinity Ward is now vying for the number-one overall FPS experience in the genre.

Call of Duty 2 will have more levels, and each one is significantly larger than any war zone in the first game, with multiple active objectives. The campaign itself has been designed as an open-ended event sequence; the basic idea involves multiple "tracks" for each character. You'll begin with the Russians in '41, progressing to the British missions in 1942 and finally the American arrival in 1944. You can play the game chronologically as one continuous experience, unlocking the war one year and one track at a time, or you can hop around to any previous year of another character's track and live the war from that perspective.

An all-new proprietary engine has been created for Call of Duty 2 with heavy emphasis on particle, smoke and heat shimmer effects as well as a widespread use of normal and specular mapping. Infinity Ward has also engineered its own custom physics solution for CoD 2. The main aesthetic MO for Infinity Ward on this project is to create a powerful atmosphere of lingering destruction and chaos on the battlefield, using every available next-gen graphical resource. IW is expecting

many CoD players that haven't upgraded their systems will also want to check out the sequel, so Call of Duty 2 will include a fallback mode allowing the game to run—stripped down, but fast—on more mass-market hardware.

One of the biggest new additions to CoD 2 is the Battle Chatter system. Military advisers told Infinity Ward that once the first shot is fired in war, all hell breaks loose with soldiers talking to each other non-stop. To capture this feeling, the level designers have set up each environment in such a way that the AI knows precisely where every major landmark is in their immediate visual range. Extensive dialog was recorded—for allies and enemies alike—to provide the AI with cool reactive audio when they figure out what's going on. You'll hear stuff like, "There's a sniper in the second floor window!" or "There are two Germans behind that telephone pole!" and because Battle Chatter is a global system, your teammates will even blurt out sensitive battlefield observations during high-speed vehicle missions. The AI will also react and adapt to each other's alerts, and for every object in the environment they can identify, they've also been given ways to roll over, climb, lean on or otherwise deal with that object. With regards to the voice talent, Activision may have some surprises in store...

Call of Duty 2 will give you the weapons and tactical freedom to approach each encounter differently. For example, there's a mission in a Tunisian



The AI will speak to you and each other, revealing enemy positions with uncanny battlefield awareness.



"...Infinity Ward is now vying for the number-one overall FPS experience in the genre."

desert city that involves taking out several gun crews. You could try a linear route from one artillery nest to the next, or pick your way through the streets and alleys, knocking out each gun in any order. You could snipe key guards—and sniping results in a tense shellshock-type of audio effect, heartbeat rising as you hold your breath to steady the aim. You might plaster the area with smoke grenades to completely smother the street, sending your men in to flank from any angle. The only rule that Infinity Ward seems to adhere to in this free-form design is constant opportunity for cinematic action. With over 30 weapons from four different nations, massive vehicle-on-

vehicle battles (think: dozens of tanks going at it) and a wide-open campaign structure, Call of Duty 2 is shaping up very nicely. One big question mark remains, and it involves the multiplayer angle. Unfortunately Activision has these details locked up tight as we go to press. We'll see what we can dig up. **Mike Griffin**

Call of Duty 2

PC

Point of Interest

Infinity Ward had a firing session in the Nevada desert where they tested every weapon's weight, accuracy and recoil.

Developer: Infinity Ward Publisher: Activision
Online: TBA Available: Fall 2005



Preview

Half-Life 2: Aftermath

Gordon's adventure continues across City 17

Valve started working on the Half-Life 2: Aftermath expansion as soon as HL2 rolled out. The game picks up Freeman's adventure right where it left off in the Citadel, and you and Alyx (and her pet robot, Dog) will be spending a lot of time together while dealing with the repercussions of events across City 17.

Most of the franchise character and creature mainstays—including their superb voice actors—will be making a return, though it's unclear what happened to Dr. Breen. One of the biggest new additions to Aftermath involves better AI and more collaboration with the NPCs, including a much more dynamic and evolved Alyx. The physics gun will also be back, along with a lot more gameplay promoting its use.

Before Aftermath ships, Valve will be introducing HDR (High Dynamic Range rendering) to the Source engine. You know all that lush full-screen glow and bloom we see in games lately? With

HDR, per-pixel color precision increases dramatically during these effects, resulting in a great deal more detail retention amidst bright and dark softening—instead of being lost in glare or pixel bleeds. If you have the hardware to support it, HL2: Aftermath will look awesome with HDR enabled.

Half-Life 2: Aftermath will be available at both retail and via Steam (Valve's excellent distribution hub). Also expect to see plenty of Aftermath's new content appearing in HL2: Deathmatch shortly after the expansion's release. **Mike Griffin**

Half-Life 2: Aftermath

PC

Point of Interest

A greater force is pulling the strings, and the G-man has the answers, but there's a crumbling Citadel to worry about...

Developer: Valve Software Publisher: VU Games

Online: None Available: Fall 2005



"The game picks up Freeman's adventure right where it left off...dealing with the repercussions of events across City 17."

Preview

Quake IV

Rumbling with Doom 3 power, Quake returns...

The Quake series has consistently nailed the finer points of FPS action while showcasing killer technology and wicked cyber-Gothic maps. Raven's forthcoming Quake IV will continue this tradition and add a full campaign with evolving characters and plotlines. Though sophisticated storytelling and Quake may sound like an unlikely combination, the Doom 3 engine is being employed here to craft Quake IV's levels and build layers of atmosphere. And as we previously assessed in the Doom 3 games, this engine adds a pretty compelling allure to standard sci-fi story conventions through sheer sensory overload.

Quake 3 Arena was a great deathmatch adrenaline rush with a rather brainless single-player mode, so id and Raven have peeled back the years and looked to Quake 2 as a precursor to the events of Quake IV. In Quake 2, Earth was under siege by the Strogg, a Borg-like cybernetic force built with mechanical frames and dilapidated body parts. The Strogg consume active and intact flesh to survive, and humans happen to be an excellent source of this sustenance.

Earth sent an armada of elite marines to the Strogg's home planet, hoping to stem the tide at its source. Only one marine survived, and he smashed through the planet's defenses, eventually fragging the Strogg leader, Makron. That should have ended the conflict, but the Strogg have regrouped...

You'll take on the role of Matthew Kane in Quake IV, an elite marine on the Rhino Squad—Earth's follow-up infiltration force tasked with delivering the final blow to the Strogg planetary compound. Quake IV will follow you and your soldiers across the planet as you dole out cyborg termination with classic and enhanced Quake weaponry and all-new vehicles.

Mike Griffin

Quake IV

PC

Point of Interest

id Software is working very closely with Raven on the multiplayer. There's a serious legacy at stake here.

Developer: Raven Software Publisher: Activision

Online: Deathmatch, more Available: Fall 2005



"...this engine adds a pretty compelling allure to standard sci-fi story conventions..."

Preview

Hellgate: London

London calling...bring your holy water

Twenty-five years in the future, mankind has been forced to flee underground after a demonic invasion bathes the Earth's surface in fire, making it uninhabitable. The attack was foreseen by a holy order known as the Templar, and they are preparing to strike back at the demons using a fusion of ancient relics and powerful technology. So goes the story behind Flagship Studios' first title, *Hellgate: London*, to be published by Namco. The developers assembling this hybrid FPS/RPG are core members of the original *Diablo* team and, taking a cue from Blizzard's venerable action-RPG, *Hellgate* will feature randomly generated levels, items and quests—with a focus on replayability.

Despite its first-person perspective, *Hellgate: London* will not rely on reflex-based aiming to connect with creatures. The game's weapons are designed in such a way that aim isn't critical: either

they have a homing aspect, a big area of effect, or they're inaccurate by default and will only hit occasionally. Weapons will do damage based on their inherent quality level and the skills activated by the player, in addition to temporary stat effects and other RPG-based ratings. You'll still have to direct your attacks, but there's no dice roll involved with a chance to hit. Building up your character will be essential.

Players will battle four "castes" of monsters across the hellfire-razed future London. True Demons have a sinister intelligence and are organized and deadly. Necros, more horrifying, are reanimated human zombies. Beasts are parasitical tag-alongs used by the demons for labor and simple tasks. The Spectrals are chaotic and enigmatic entities found near the demons but operating independently. Each will demonstrate the flair of a creature from a modern FPS, drawn with painstaking detail in *Hellgate*'s powerful



"...*Hellgate* will feature randomly generated levels, items and quests—with a focus on replayability."



engine. Beneath the pretty skin: the statistical complexity of an RPG enemy.

Environments in *Hellgate* are primarily being designed with the solo player and small group in mind. Some areas of the world may generate missions that are geared towards much larger groups, and Flagship says it's "very likely" the instances will auto-scale monster quantity and difficulty to provide an appropriate challenge. The levels will generate different layouts and monster placement, and item drops will also randomize each time a mission is initiated. Realizing the importance of milestones in RPGs, Flagship will include some quest-oriented levels that are less random and

a few exceptional un-repeatable quest encounters.

Flagship and Namco haven't committed to a release date yet for *Hellgate: London*, but they will be showing a new version at E3, and we'll be on hand for some divine retribution. **Mike Griffin**

Hellgate: London

PC

Point of Interest

Flagship is considering downloadable content, expansion packs and even mod tools.

Developer: Flagship Studios Publisher: Namco

Online: Mission-based group combat Available: TBA

Demons and Necros claim the planet for Hell and only a Templar's holy weaponry can end their occupation.

Preview

Dungeon Siege 2

Enter the crypts in a deeper world

Though rumors of a Diablo 3 continue to circulate, gamers will be receiving a heavy dose of traditional action-RPG when Gas Powered Games unleashes *Dungeon Siege 2* this summer.

A thousand years after a legendary war, sinister Prince Valdis is shown a vision of the Plain of Tears, where the battle took place. He and his entourage of dark wizards locate the source: the Sword of Zaramoth, encased in lava stone. As Valdis lifts the sword from its broken housing, his flesh and bones shift, grow and realign. The now-colossal Valdis—his malevolence amplified tenfold—builds a bloodthirsty army of Morden beasts and mercenaries, tearing across the land in search of relics.

You begin as one of these hired mercs, sadly misguided, learning the basics in the midst of an invasion. The control and interface in *Dungeon Siege 2* have seen a sharp improvement and the addition of a branching skill tree—where you can mold unique melee and caster archetypes—is very welcome. Each class will have distinctive Heroic Powers, like the ranger's Repulse technique, which blasts a mental globe around him to keep foes at bay. Many

powers are designed with collaborative strikes in mind between you and NPC group-mates. You can also relegate your NPC partners to less offensive roles with simple party commands. Every sword slash, dagger poke or fireball toss contributes to a skill increase, so it's important to spread the love.

Though character models are somewhat rudimentary at this stage, *Dungeon Siege 2* boasts fantastic animation, excellent soft shadows, and strong foliage and particle systems. There's a full story-driven quest across 100 character levels of frenetic action, and you can now assemble secondary quests that encourage exploration. If the full campaign works out well, DS2 should be a very promising sequel. **Mike Griffin**

Dungeon Siege 2

PC

Point of Interest

Remember the packmule in the first game? Expect more exotic creatures that travel and grow with you in DS2.

Developer: Gas Powered Games Publisher: Microsoft Game Studios

Online: 4p co-op Available: Summer 2005

"As Valdis lifts the sword from its broken housing, his flesh and bones shift, grow and realign."



Review

The Matrix Online

Demonstrating Neo-like capacity for improvement

Since the release of *The Matrix Online*, Monolith and WB have worked tirelessly to tighten up the game with patches, while the Wachowski/Chadwick post-*Revolutions* plot has had time to expand into the first phase of a huge scheduled story installment.

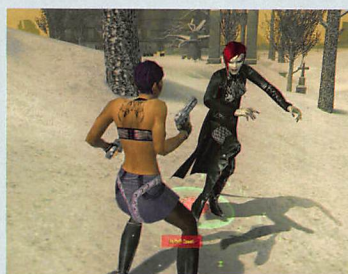
The *Matrix Online* (MxO) has the market cornered on urban style in the massively multiplayer genre. There's some repetition in certain areas, but the neighborhoods are large and distinct. Building interiors are probably the weakest area of MxO's visuals, with a lot of asset recycling, but they transition seamlessly from outdoors, adding a layer of immersion. All told, it's a very effective city design, though it may require a good week of progress to reach areas that really stand out as *Matrix* material.

Powering this huge city is a highly scalable engine. We pushed every image

quality setting on an above-spec PC, and the frame rate was fairly consistent. MxO is one of a handful of titles to post a 1 GB memory recommendation, and indeed, RAM plays a huge role here. We raised the test machine to 2 GB of RAM with a second kit of Ocz's fast dual-channel memory, and *The Matrix Online* made excellent use of it.

MxO features a mission system with virtually unlimited "quests." The trade-off here: if you aren't running one of the rare Critical Missions, the standard auto-generated missions employ, by design, slightly modified cut-and-paste objectives, a static list of NPC names, and very stiff pacing. It's great to have a cash and experience point source anytime, anywhere, but we hope to see more inspired missions appearing for each organization.

While the game's Interlock combat isn't



the revelation it could have been, it feels pretty exciting, and the amazing quantity of ability profiles anyone can use—going from martial artist to hacker, and more, in a few seconds—is certainly refreshing.

The *Matrix Online* is a unique experience in the genre thanks to its close adherence to the imagery, sound and character style of a film franchise. Though solid, it does not evolve the genre's gameplay, but it does raise the bar for interactive storytelling in an MMO title.

Mike Griffin

The Matrix Online

PC

8.0
Score

ⓘ Huge city; many levels and custom ability loads. *Matrix* storyline continues where third film ended.

⚠ Demanding on hardware with settings you should be using. Mission system is ultimately very generic.

Developer: Monolith Productions Publisher: Warner Bros. Interactive/Sega

Online: Massively multiplayer Available: March (Version update in May)



"...has the market cornered on urban style in the massively multiplayer genre."



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Postscript

Valve and VU Games agree to disagree: partnership coming to a close

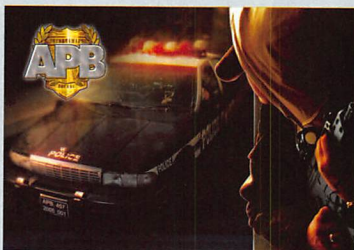
As of August 31 2005, Vivendi Universal Games will officially cease its distribution of packaged Valve titles. These include: Half-Life, Half-Life 2, all flavors of Counter-Strike and possibly the Xbox version of Half-Life 2. It's the grand denouement to a court battle that dates back to 2002, when Valve took great exception to Sierra's (VU Games subsidiary) distribution of their titles in cyber-café, as the license did not allow for this. Valve was also pissed—in a breach-of-contract sort of way—about the delayed release of CounterStrike: Condition Zero, claiming that VU intentionally held it back from retail during

the holiday 2003 season even though it was ready to ship. All told, almost three full years later, Valve and VU Games have agreed to settle out of court. In addition to the August 31st parting of ways, VU must notify any cyber cafés previously using a VU Games license that "only Valve is authorized to distribute Valve games to cyber cafés and grant cyber café licenses." Basically any cafés running a Valve title based on a Sierra Entertainment or VU Games license can now consider those rights null and void. Will Valve go full Steam ahead with its own distribution model, or will every major publisher on the planet court them at E3?

Webzen puts out an APB on SUN

When it comes to online RPG companies, most North American gamers think of SoE, Mythic, Square Enix, NCsoft and most recently (and prominently) Blizzard. Consider yourself formally introduced to Webzen, the Korean online games provider with an astounding 56 million-user track record for their Asian phenom, MU Online. Webzen is opening nine new studios and employing 450 new workers with the goal of conquering the North American market. In addition to the MMO FPS Huxley previewed this month, Webzen has announced APB: All Points Bulletin and SUN.

Grand Theft Auto creator David Jones and his Real Time Worlds development house are creating APB: All Points Bulletin, slated for a 2007 release by Webzen. APB is a "massively multiplayer online freeform combat and driving-based game" staged in a massive city



where players assume the role of law enforcement or gang sides. The gameplay is all about dramatic shoot-outs, chases, busts, escapes and arrests, while each side attempts to expand their sphere of influence and control parts of the city. Players will customize their vehicles, weapons, clothes, music and even their environment, using graffiti.

SUN (Soul of the Ultimate Nation) is Webzen's hybrid action-MMO, scheduled for release this year. The game will feature an original score by Oscar winner Howard Shore, of *Lord of the Rings* fame, and a new engine capable of extremely high poly counts and cutting-edge texture effects. SUN will have a much more customized approach to its instanced content, allowing users to choose the type of map, the range of difficulty for monsters, and entry numbers. SUN will also allow siege warfare using an intriguing multi-level partitioned battlefield, each section containing 20 to 40 players. The results from one level will directly affect the ongoing combat on another level. Regular missions will have a console-game feel, with more action and opportunities to unlock secret missions.

Turbine supports Asheron's Call 2, prepares Middle-Earth Online

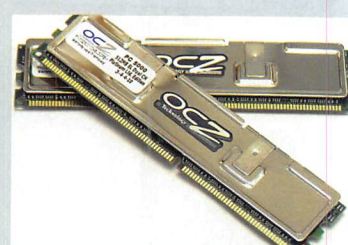
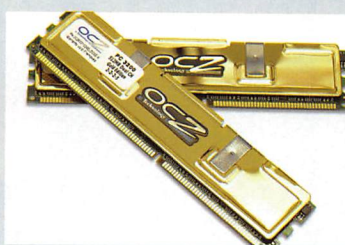


After going independent last year and buying back the Asheron's Call license from Microsoft, online developer Turbine set to work modernizing the original Asheron's Call and adding extensive content to Asheron's Call 2. The AC 2: Legions expansion is rolling out in May, and it will introduce a new world continent, new playable races and over 100 quests. Twenty new dungeons have been hidden across the new lands, each with ancient scripts to decode, and 300 new skills and abilities have been sprinkled through the skill trees. AC 2

is a fairly mature MMO, and there are opportunities for high-level progression in Legions via three new Prestige Classes. Turbine is also readying Dungeons and Dragons Online for an upcoming closed beta, and their biggest project, *Lord of the Rings: Middle Earth Online*, is in full production and on schedule for a 2006 release. It is Turbine's goal to stay absolutely consistent with the Tolkien lore, and they are searching the deepest appendices of his works for descriptions of Middle-Earth.

Gaming RAM from OCZ

Frequently the biggest barrier between you and a smooth gaming experience is system RAM. When you run out of physical RAM with a particularly hungry title, your PC has to use its page file on the hard drive, and this memory can be up to 50 times slower. This can cause nasty performance hitching. We recently upgraded a PC test system to 2 GB for *The Matrix Online*, and while the game certainly doesn't need that much RAM, it happily consumed the extra space on the Dual-Channel kit from OCZ and performed brilliantly. This isn't just a plug for a memory company; OCZ prices are very reasonable and their Gold Series—designed for the gaming sector—has some excellent low latency timings, at 2-2-2, which really caught our attention. All their modules are backed by a lifetime warranty, and you can't go wrong there.



NPD PC Game Sales

Week of April 10 - April 16

01. World Of Warcraft - VU Games
02. The Sims 2 University - EA
03. The Sims 2 - EA
04. Doom 3: Resurrection of Evil - Activision
05. The Sims Deluxe - EA
06. Half-Life 2 - VU Games
07. Galaxy Of Games 350 JC - eGames
08. Lego Star Wars - Eidos
09. Halo: Combat Evolved - Microsoft
10. SWAT 4 - VU Games



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Gunstar Super Heroes

Hero worship



Those of you familiar with Gunstar Heroes already know what the big deal is, while those of you who don't are probably wondering what all the fuss is over a genre you thought went out with the cassette tape, on Game Boy Advance no less. The big deal is that Treasure not only makes the best 2D action games in the world, but that their entire business model has revolved around never doing sequels. The team that would become Treasure broke away from Konami in the mid-'90s after crafting masterpieces like Castlevania IV and Super Contra to get away from doing sequels (TMNT did them in) and has held fast to that credo until recently—even though they could have made piles of money. Arguably their best game ever, the hardware-defying über-action sensation Gunstar Heroes coming to GBA is both unexpected and supremely exciting.

Not to say that Gunstar Super Heroes is "all new." Now before you say, "I knew it!" hear me out. GSH is, for all intents

and purposes, a sequel, even though it incorporates all of the levels from the original. They are so different, so shellacked with added effects and art, you barely recognize them, and they're sandwiched between new levels that do for the GBA what GH did for the Genesis: seemingly defy the specs. Treasure somehow makes hardware fit their modus operandi rather than operating within the parameters of the hardware. Even if you've memorized Gunstar Heroes end-to-end, you'll barely recognize the parts you're replaying.

To give you a first-hand idea of how the game has changed, here's a first stage blow-by-blow... First of all it, doesn't even start on the Moon; it begins on Earth, scrolling left, from a brief skyway bit through an X-ray screen in the rear layer (where you fight silhouetted) to a meeting with an old friend. Then back right, through a tough droid encounter, and finally back out onto the skyway where you'll battle an enormous effects-laden boss so gargantuan he's using your ship to try to squash you. Next comes the first of the game's segues patterned after classic Genesis games (I know, I about lost it), this one a version of After Burner in reverse with 360-degree rotation. And then finally comes GH's original first level, Moon 1, which now has like



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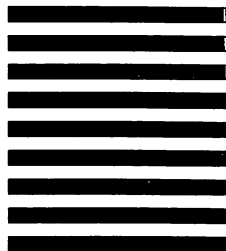
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"...pure, unadulterated, hardcore 2D that makes you swear to yourself, 'I will memorize every inch of this game if it takes me six months.'"



Above and left: Thunderblade and Galaxy Force make the Gunstar scene.



five layers of new independently scrolling backgrounds and even crazier explosions. Arriving at the old tentacle mid-boss, defeating it deposits you into a 360-degree rotating maze, then it's on to the pyramid, which is now white stone, adorned with 2D water so real you can almost drink it. Defeating the strange being made of boxes at the top (also completely redone), instead of sliding down the back side, you now freefall down a chasm, shooting debris until finally you face the end-level boss robot at the bottom... So you see, sequel but kinda not. I'm sure it's just Treasure's way of saying hey...we didn't *really* do a sequel.

Next, of course (after an ode to Thunderblade), comes the base assault (I think the muscle man on the helicopter's been holding a grudge), followed soon after by the shaft assault, which is now so indescribably amazing I'm not even going to attempt to describe it. From that point, our ROM starts to go a bit loopy, however; level selecting around, I've stumbled onto an homage to Golden Axe and Sonic, knocked around in the new version of Black's Crazy Dice Maze, which is now bigger and trippier than ever, and dropped in on the now fully rotatable side-scrolling shooter phase. All the while, the music and character grunts are vintage Gunstar, the explosions are what you'd imagine all these years later, and the



gameplay, pure unadulterated hardcore 2D that makes you swear to yourself, "I will memorize every inch of this game if it takes me six months." Speaking of which, if you don't own a GBA TV adapter, now is the time. I put the game up on my plasma, and it holds up extremely well. It's so manic at times the larger screen really helps.

Now I'm not going to lie to you and say I'm ready to renounce 3D; however, I will say that this industry has a gaping hole in it where games like this used to reside—games that can be made in a year for a fraction of what 3D costs by teams one-third the size. That every one of these monolithic companies that pump out mostly high-dollar crap every year don't have at least one in the works at all times is absurd.

Our Treasure interview just missed deadline, so look for it in the next issue. DH

Gunstar Super Heroes

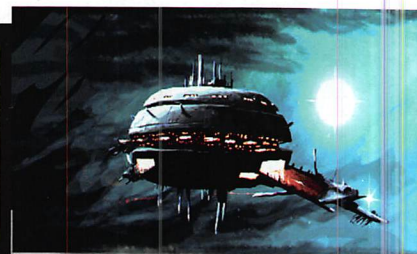
Game Boy Advance

Point of Interest

The Gunstar Super team is currently at odds over which Mega Drive homages to use, including Golden Axe... We say keep 'em all!

Developer: Treasure Publisher: Sega
Multiplayer: TBA Available: Q4 2005

Preview



Nanostray

Nintendo DS

Point of Interest

Majesco is currently one of the few companies green-lighting original games and shooters, so show your support by coming out for them.

Developer: Shin'en **Publisher:** Majesco **Multiplayer:** 2p co-op **Available:** July

If Silpheed, R-Type and Darius had a baby, it would look something like Majesco's Nanostray: a 3/4-view polygonal shooter that combines the dramatic trajectory of Silpheed, serpentine patterns of R-Type and the austere bosses of Darius. This is a very good thing, by the way—especially given the multiplayer aspects—if

not the type of game that will further cement the DS as America's handheld. Using the touch-screen to prod small yellow vermin may be a painful endeavor, but using it as a full-screen HUD to scan bosses and easily toggle weapons is the shit, especially when the shooter it's attached to looks this good. Nanostray also gives us a taste of what

the DS is actually capable of, and I'll be the first to say my faith in the system is nearly restored. If only developers stopped trying to reinvent the wheel (make that pen) and just make great RPGs, shooters and platformers that utilize the screen for utility purposes, we could all go back to worshipping our small, flippy Nintendo units. Shin'en is certainly doing their part. These people know shooters; and thanks sincerely to Majesco for continuing to publish great games that might otherwise never see the light of day, or at least not enough light. **Dave Halverson**

The lower screen is put to great use as a HUD, weapons select, and to scan enemies.



Yoshi: Topsy-Turvy

Game Boy Advance

Developer: Artoon **Publisher:** Nintendo
Multiplayer: None **Available:** June

Yoshi: Topsy-Turvy may look like a sequel to platforming greats of the past like Yoshi's Story and Yoshi's Island—the storybook visuals certainly fit the part—but the unique gameplay proves that it's anything but. Using the

same gyroscopic technology as the upcoming WarioWare: Twisted, Topsy-Turvy will have players literally spinning their GBAs around to control the action, rotating the game world around Yoshi, allowing him to take out enemies and negotiate obstacles in unique fashion; walls will become floors, and Yoshi can ride atop balls to roll through the constantly changing environment. (He'll still be able to eat enemies, too.) Is it gaming genius or another crazy idea stemming from Nintendo's mad quest for innovation? Possibly both. **CH**



Kirby: Canvas Curse

Nintendo DS

Developer: Hal Laboratory **Publisher:** Nintendo
Multiplayer: None **Available:** June

Somewhat like Yoshi Touch & Go, Kirby: Canvas Curse takes another Nintendo superstar and places him in a platform-action game where you don't control the character directly, but rather guide him through his colorful

adventure, using the stylus to manipulate Kirby and the game world. Players can draw ramps to make Kirby jump, walls to defend against enemy attacks, and loops to speed him up, plus he can charge into enemies to consume them and take their abilities—but only after you stun them with a jab from the stylus. Unlike Touch & Go, however, Canvas Curse is more of a full-fledged game, with seven fully explorable worlds and end-of-level boss battles. Nintendo claims the level design is among the best. **Chris Hoffman**

MediEvil Resurrection

One of the better fantasy adventures from PSOne gets another life

Before Cambridge Studios delivered the underrated *Ghost Hunter* and *Primal* on PS2, these British developers with a mind geared for the adventurous and fantastical gifted the PSOne with a personal favorite, the eccentric fairy-tale quest *MediEvil*. The game featured a rather unique central character named Sir Daniel Fortesque, a resurrected skeleton who served as a respected knight before his untimely death.

In this retelling of Sir Daniel's plight to vanquish Sorcerer Zarak (he's evil and wants to rule), some things haven't changed. The setting is once again Dan's old stomping ground, the colorfully spooky land of Gallowmere, a place where the night refuses to return to day and armies of the undead terrorize the primitive inhabitants. It was thought that Sir Daniel was a hero, claiming to have offed Zarak for good in his previous adventures; turns out Sir Dan was a poser, himself the one who was truthfully killed in the climactic end battle.

So fast-forward 100 years and this new PSP adventure begins, mixing the recognizable with the brand new; say hello to Harbor Master of Scurvy and Forrest Witch. Several characters and settings return, obviously remodeled for a proper update, but along with the technical embellishments come some fairly major alterations. Along with original levels and characters, Dan's been given a sidekick,

Al Zalam, a sardonic genie who's trapped inside our skeletal hero's hollow skull.

It would seem that the combat system is a lot more complex than before, employing a 200-move set and 20 weapons to match. Your skills will be tested outside the main quest if you

When pumpkins attack: Sir Dan may be a bag of bones, but he swings a mean blade.



like, where a ton of mini-games await in such areas as a Carnival zone, as well as multiplayer competition over Wi-Fi. How do unlikely two-player battles properly figure in to what was once a straight adventure game? Anything's possible; you are, after all, practically holding a PS2 in your hand to play *MediEvil Resurrection*. **Brady Fiechter**

"...night refuses to return to day and armies of the undead terrorize the primitive inhabitants."

MediEvil Resurrection

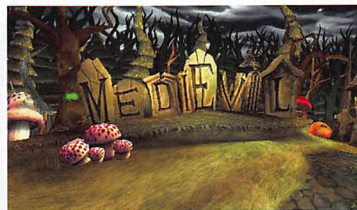
PSP

Point of Interest

All told, there are more than 70 minigames incorporated into *MediEvil Resurrection*.

Developer: Cambridge Studios **Publisher:** Sony

Multiplayer: 2p versus **Available:** September



E3 First Look

2005

Namco Museum Battle Collection

PSP

Namco has packed more than 20 games into this compilation, letting you experience classics like Ms. Pac-Man, Dig Dug, Rally X, Galaga, Xevious, Rolling Thunder, Tower of Druaga and more anytime you choose. Both the original versions and visually enhanced updates are included, and there's an emphasis on multiplayer gameplay, be it versus or co-op. **Chris Hoffman**



Developer: Namco **Publisher:** Namco **Multiplayer:** 4p co-op/versus **Available:** Summer

Meteos

Nintendo DS

The word on Meteos is that once you've experienced its uniquely addictive gameplay, all other puzzle games on the DS will pretty much be obsolete. The goal here is to line up groups of like-colored meteors and launch them back into space, defending 30 planets—each with unique gravitational rules and block styles—against the evil Meteo. **Chris Hoffman**



Developer: Q Entertainment/Bandai **Publisher:** Nintendo **Multiplayer:** 4p versus **Available:** June

The Con

PSP

A one-on-one team-based fighting game set amongst the seedy underworld fight scene, The Con lets players master distinct fighting styles—tae kwon do, kickboxing, wrestling, jeet kune do or boxing—as well as gamble on the outcome of their fights. An over-the-shoulder perspective and the ability to map photos onto the characters' faces ensure a unique gameplay experience. **Chin Lui**



Developer: Sony Santa Monica/Think & Feel Inc. **Publisher:** Sony **Multiplayer:** 2p versus **Available:** October

Pac 'n Roll

Nintendo DS

Pac 'n Roll has come a long way since its debut, changing from a maze-navigation game to a full-blown adventure, spanning worlds like the Floating Castle and Ghost House, filled with power-ups like armor and a flying hat. What haven't changed are the innovative controls, which have you controlling Pac-Man by manipulating his visage on the touch-screen like a track ball. **Chris Hoffman**



Developer: Namco **Publisher:** Namco **Multiplayer:** 2p versus **Available:** Summer

Dead to Rights: Reckoning

PSP

Whether or not you enjoyed the console versions of Dead to Rights, there's no question that the PSP version is one impressive-looking game. As before, Officer Jack Slate is waging his one-man war against crime, armed with loads of weapons, lethal disarm moves, cinematic evasive maneuvers and, of course, his trusty dog, Shadow. Versus multiplayer also generously included. **CH**



Developer: Rebellion **Publisher:** Namco **Multiplayer:** Deathmatch **Available:** June

Advance Wars DS

Nintendo DS

Continuing the tradition of turn-based, anime-inspired, military action that we experienced on GBA, Advance Wars DS adds new unit types—aircraft carriers, stealth fighters, megatanks and more—and new commanding officers to the fray, as well as new tag-team super attacks, new dual-screen battles and a new Combat mode featuring real-time battles. **Chris Hoffman**



Developer: Intelligent Systems **Publisher:** Nintendo **Multiplayer:** 8p versus **Available:** Q3 2005



Evil lurks in
the shadows.

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Star Wars Episode III: Revenge of the Sith

Nintendo DS

7.5

Score

Not perfect, but the best DS side-scroller thus far. Cool 3D bits.

The 2D can get repetitive even though the Force powers do mix it up nicely.

Developer: Ubisoft Publisher: Ubisoft Multiplayer: 4p versus Available: May

Looking at the current DS lineup and considering the impact Episode III is going to have on the gross national product, Ubisoft could have put a block of wood in a case and sold a few hundred thousand, so I'm contented that they took the time to build a solid GBA

game, plus a worthy array of 3D components for the DS that don't include acting a fool with a stylus. The side-scrolling bits live or die by tried and true arcade-style gameplay supported by an evolving array of Force powers as you progress, equipping specials and distributing points to

fortify your Jedi of choice.

The balance of enemies is deftly tuned as to not hold you in one place for too long; the melee itself is varied nicely by the versatile light saber and the growing number of moves; Ubisoft employs 2D gaming's version of real-time cinematics to good effect; and the music and sound effects are impeccable. Still, without the 3D scenarios, I might tire of this no matter how well devised, so they are welcome relief and nicely put together. Divided between maneuvering and open-sky dogfights, they work well to reward/rescue from the inevitable repetition of the side-scrolling action. Combined, Episode III equates to a DS game that steers well clear of the dark side. **Dave Halverson**

Anakin avoids incoming fire while exercising his right to saber the moment.



ATV Offroad Fury: Blazin' Trails

PSP

6.5

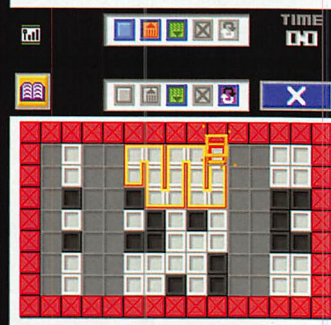
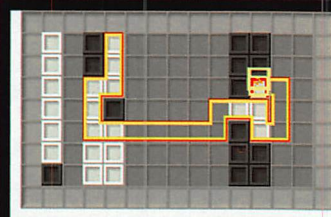
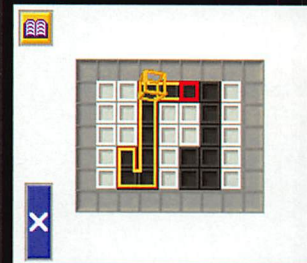
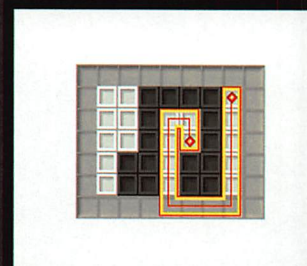
Score

Developer: Climax Publisher: Sony Multiplayer: 4p versus Available: April

Climax has made a really beautiful, deep and well-rounded mobile racer with Blazin' Trails, which makes it all the more painful that these trails are so hard to blaze. The problem lies in the sluggish cornering and oft times hard-to-decipher track markings (even in enduro mode the gates are too close together and the arrows misleading) compounded by a preload system that doesn't gel with the terrain or the animation. Rather than compress and let fly,



Climax has installed a quick forward-back motion you need to get off earlier than the terrain would lead you to believe: very frustrating. The shoulder button helps cornering by speeding up the rate at which the background turns, but ultimately these ATVs feel more like semi trucks. **Dave Halverson**



Polarium

Nintendo DS

7.0

Score

Developer: Mitchell Corp. Publisher: Nintendo Multiplayer: 2p versus Available: April

It may look plain, but Polarium is a game that really etched itself into my brain. Though extremely simple in design, the challenge involved in using a single line to form solid rows of black and white tiles is one I found

welcome, addictive and with just enough of a frustration factor to make it fun. The 100-stage puzzle mode makes the game, since the nearly endless challenge mode lacks the options for lasting enjoyment (no difficulty select?), but unfortunately the game's presentation holds it back. The front end is as dry as can be and requires you to manually advance to the next stage, and—let's face it—this whole game could have been done stylus-free on the old black-and-white Game Boy. **Chris Hoffman**

REVIEW

Sell by date: infinity

One of the best pattern-based side-scrolling action games of the 16-bit era, if not ever. Just beautiful.



"The seal is destroyed. The world has started on the path of destruction. You are the only one, the last descendant of the Magician Lord who can stop it." ...Now that's a story! It was all I needed.

Every time I speak with an SNK representative, my first question—no, second after I ask them why they can only seem to pull fighting games out of the Neo Geo file besides Metal Slug—is why they don't port Cyber Lip, Blue's Journey, Nam 1775 and the all-time Neo Geo action classic Magician Lord over to handheld... Or better yet, offer a Neo Geo Collection on console! Toss in Spinmaster and Ninja Combat and make us all jump for joy. Their answer... always the same: yeah, we're thinking about that. Cue the crickets. Meanwhile, if you want to play a true arcade classic that will test your motor skills like no other—save for maybe Mystic Defender on Genesis—feast your eyes and ears on Magician Lord, the pinnacle of early-'90s 16- (or was it 24?) bit

Magician Lord

46-mega shock and awe

System: Neo Geo Developer: SNK Publisher: SNK Released: 1990

technology. You'll need a Neo Geo to play it, but with 181 other titles to choose from, it's not a bad investment. Magician Lord is a timeless, beautiful side-scroller that emphasizes brutal pattern memorization (the '90s version of AI) and choosing the right form for the level at hand. The game is short by today's standards, but it takes forever to beat with limited continues, so the fun here is in chipping away until you master it, and then savoring your victory. I miss these...a lot. Dave Halverson

"...a true arcade classic that will test your motor skills like no other..."

Do not adjust your magazine. This stage is indeed upside-down.



Castle of Illusion Starring Mickey Mouse

Illusion is better than reality

System: Genesis Developer: Sega Publisher: Sega Released: 1990

It seems all too easy to say when referring to a Disney-based video game, but Sega's Castle of Illusion Starring Mickey Mouse is, in a word, magical. Though the game's mechanics are fairly simple—butt-bouncing on enemies and throwing objects at them, such as apples or marbles, made up the core gameplay—Sega did it with a truly inspired imagination. Mickey's journey to defeat the evil witch Mizrabel took players through some of the most creative levels and beautiful visuals ever seen on console, from treetops where players could almost feel the dew glistening on the spider webs in the background to a world built of dessert, where Mickey stood on floating mounds of cake and jelly-fish (fish which seemed to really be made of jelly) jumped from a lake of milk. In one of the game's most inspired levels, players could hit switches to flip the background, rendering the level upside-down with Mickey walking on the ceiling, while any enemies nearby would fall and

explode in a puff of white sparkles. Deep, gorgeous, multi-leveled parallax effects added further awe to Mickey's quest, as did the impressive transparency effects, which were almost unheard of at the time, while an emotion-heightening musical score complemented the visuals perfectly. Just like the best Disney movies, Castle of Illusion is a game that transcends age and time. Chris Hoffman

"...some of the most creative levels and beautiful visuals ever seen on console..."

WWE Day of Reckoning 2

A deeper, more strategic wrestling experience

Preview

WWE Day of Reckoning 2 wants to do it all. Look at one side of the ring and you see a direct sequel to last year's extremely capable GameCube offering, building off the original with the same excellent grappling engine and a story that actually picks up where the last game left off, with the player having taken their rookie custom character from jobber to world champion.

Look at the other side of the ring, however, and you'll see that DOR2 is making its gameplay much more strategic than any other WWE game to date, with the addition of a stamina meter that depletes as characters perform moves. Although fans of quick action might start booing like they're at a Gene Snitsky match, the stamina meter, even in early form, really did give the matches a better, more TV-like flow, allowing for comebacks from an offensive onslaught. Yuke's has also modified the submission system, letting players use the C-stick to decide whether

to use the hold as an offensive move or simply as a rest hold with which to regain stamina.

In other regards, DOR2 is being enhanced with a 30 percent increase in the polys for character models (mostly in the face for authentic expressions), attribute growth that depends on your play style, mo-capped cutscenes and an increase to 45 characters, including more legends from the past. DOR2 will be THQ's last WWE title on the GameCube, and they want to make sure the series goes out with a bang.

Chris Hoffman

WWE Day of Reckoning 2

GameCube

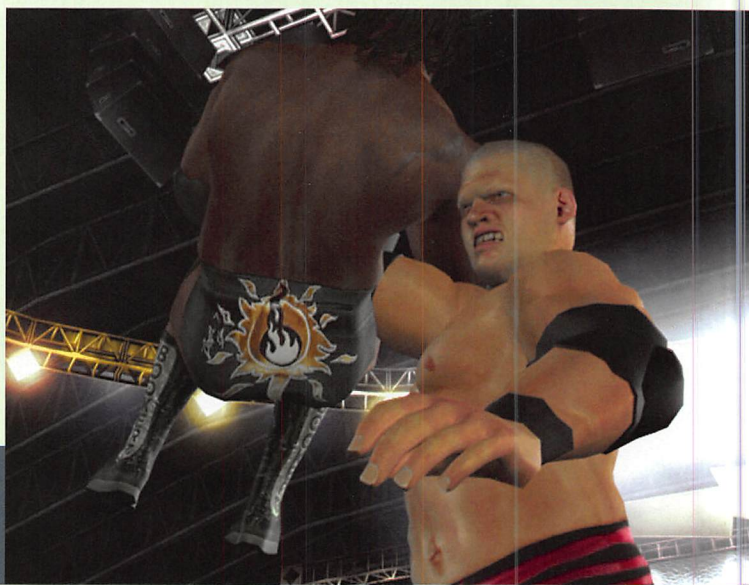
Preview

Point of Interest

Writers from the WWE SmackDown! TV program will help create the storylines for the game.

Developer: Yuke's **Publisher:** THQ

Online: None **Available:** Q3 2005



"...the stamina meter, even in early form, really did give the matches a better, more TV-like flow..."

WWE WrestleMania 21

Send it back to the developmental territories

Review

There's a pretty good wrestling game buried within WWE WrestleMania 21, but you have to look past a lot of flaws to see it. WM21 offers a sweet grappling engine and a familiar but improved counter system, but trying to experience them means wading through shoddy collision, characters that magically slide and teleport, ring ropes that get stuck on characters, features that don't seem to work and plenty of other snafus. (There are even more glitches if you don't download the patch, so be sure you're Live before even thinking about playing.) Other aspects of WM21 feature equal amounts of good and bad, like the story mode, which has fantastic vignettes with full superstar voice-over, but is also completely linear and requires players to use a custom character created with the game's sub-par create-a-superstar mode. On the other hand, the modes and character roster are certainly up to snuff,

and the visuals are rather impressive on the whole, with some nice detailing on the wrestlers' bodies, such as high-res tattoos and veins visible on the limbs. It's also fully playable online (although that has problems too, like when I fought two Kurt Angles at once), so if you can overcome the myriad of glitches, there's fun to be had...but this is a game clearly shipped before its time.

Chris Hoffman

WWE WrestleMania 21

Xbox

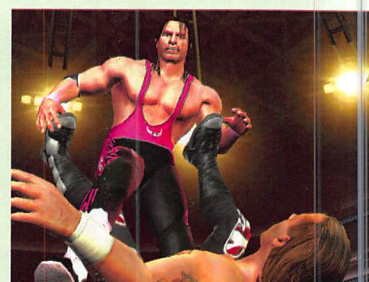
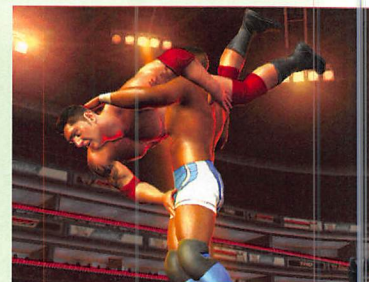
Score 5.0

Good grappling engine, solid features, good visuals. Great cutscenes.

Very glitchy, including many collision woes. Poor custom character mode.

Developer: Studio Gigante **Publisher:** THQ

Online: 4p versus, tag, battle royale, etc. **Available:** April



Unlockable legend Bret Hart's animation is spot-on in WrestleMania 21.

"...be sure you're Live before even thinking about playing."



THQ Superstar Challenge

Battle for the video game championship

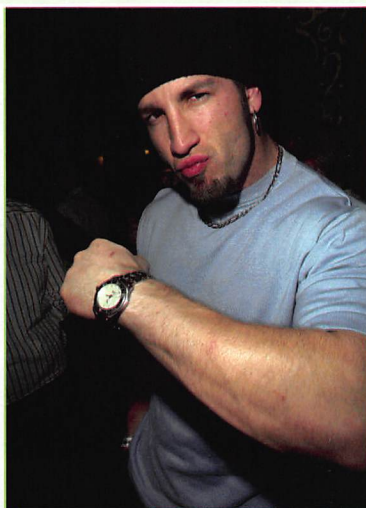
Interview

Three days before WWE WrestleMania 21, held April 2nd at the Staples Center in Los Angeles, THQ held the third annual Superstar Challenge, where 16 superstars such as Big Show, Batista and Stacy Kiebler could release their aggressions by playing the WWE WrestleMania 21 game on Xbox. For the third year straight, Shelton Benjamin claimed ultimate victory, defeating John Cena, Kane and Randy Orton along the way.



Kurt Angle

True to form, Kurt Angle was as serious as ever, even when competing at the Superstar Challenge. "I don't play video games. ...I came here basically to do an appearance, see the people, and play John Cena to see how good he really is. He actually kicked my butt."



The Hurricane

What would a video game based on The Hurricane be like? "By day—professional wrestler. By night—crimefighter. Have villains that interact between both of the lifestyles. That'd be cool. That'd be a tight game." What about joining a boy band, ala his stint in WCW's Three Count? "Actually, the boy band would be some of the villains that the Hurricane would have to take down."



Kane

Kane's a hardcore gamer, and only half as scary as his in-ring persona. But don't make him mad: "On the PS1, I was a big fan of GameDay. All the guys told me to pick up Madden. And I picked up Madden. ...The Rams threw a long pass across the middle, my free safety runs into the referee, he caught the pass, scored a touchdown. I pulled the game out, threw it into the fireplace, and put GameDay back in. Yeah!"



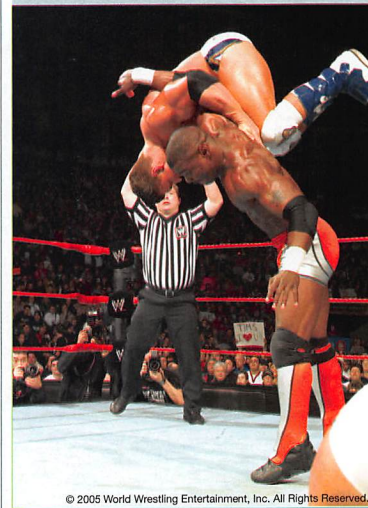
Trish Stratus

Despite being a big Xbox fan (Halo 2 is her current fave), WWE Women's Champion Trish Stratus lost in the first round. "I think I pretty much sucked, but, you know, the only reason I sucked was because I need to rest up for my big match on Sunday." Trish's apparent strategy worked, as she easily dispatched her opponent, Christy Hemme, in mere minutes at WrestleMania 21.



Lita

Lita surprised even herself by defeating Miss Jackie in the opening round before going down in defeat against Stacy Kiebler in the quarter-finals. A casual gamer, Lita prefers the classics or pinball, but as a dog lover, she's intrigued by Nintendogs on the DS. "That would totally be up my alley. I'll have to look into that."



Shelton Benjamin

For the third year in a row, Shelton Benjamin took the THQ Superstar Challenge crown, this time defeating John Cena in the finals. He attributes his victory to "a combination of my hard work and laziness. My hard work at playing...the laziness for not doing anything else with my life while I was doing it." Benjamin is one of the biggest gamers in the WWE, and is currently enjoying his new PSP and the DS.



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Tenjho Tenge

Super-action funny fighting sexy anime!



The last thing traveling bad-asses Souichiro Nagi and his buddy Bob expected as they rolled into Todo Academy to take over their 100th school was for Souichiro (the baddest bad-ass of them all) to get his ass kicked by Maya Natsume: a 3-foot-tall munchkin holed up in voluptuous 17-year-old teenage body. Never mind her booting him out a window through the shower room roof below, right into the sumptuous thighs of her little sister Aya, quite possibly the most gorgeous girl on the planet. The thing with Aya is you break it, you buy it; his lips fell on hers, and as far as she's concerned, that's grounds for marriage... Some takeover. Of course, Souichiro wants nothing to do with her, as he's way too preoccupied with the fact that he actually lost a fight...and it certainly won't be the last time. From this point *Tenjho Tenge* could easily veer into all-too-familiar territory—and any red-blooded male would surely stay tuned—however, this show takes the high road, and instead takes more than a few unexpected turns early on that are just too good to give away. One thing is for sure: Souichiro and Bob didn't invade just any old school. This is the Todo Academy, a school designed

for the explicit purpose of bringing back martial arts to Japan, and this is where the best of the best cut their teeth. Even the wimps are bad-asses. All you need to know about *Tenjho Tenge* at this point is that it's probably the best-proportioned such series ever, juggling serious martial arts, mysticism, mega fan service, comedy, drama and just a pinch of the absurd. It's also gorgeous in terms of animation, background integrity, animatography, effects and especially style, exuding its own brand of martial-arts-meets-hip-hop cool along with the most infectious opening animation and theme since *Cowboy Bebop*. Dave Halverson

Tenjho Tenge

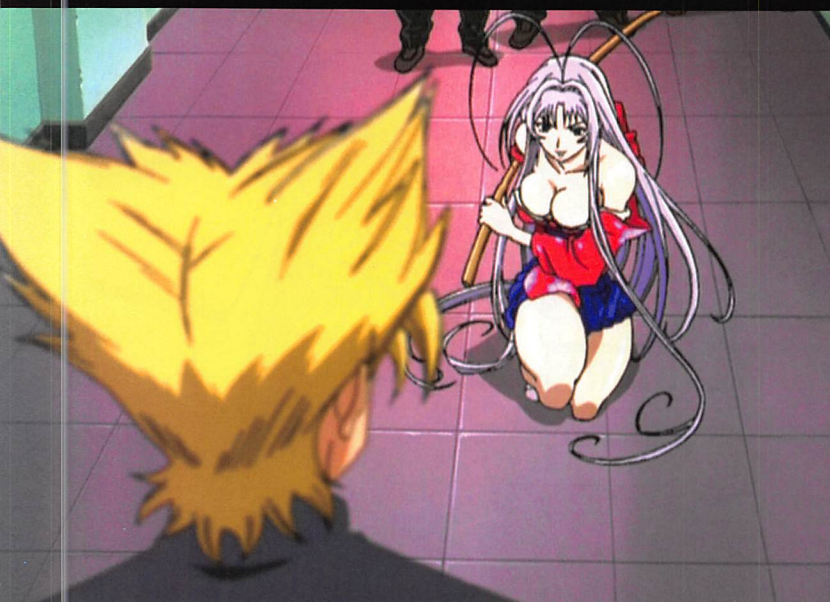
Volume: 1

9.5
Score

Sexy, action-packed, funny and still intelligent. How often does that happen?

Hmmm, let's see... something bad... nope, sorry. Okay; it ain't Miyazaki.

Released by: Geneon Entertainment Rating: 16 and up
Running Time: 100 minutes Available: May



Seconds ago, she was a three-foot-tall munchkin...

"...this is where the best of the best cut their teeth. Even the wimps are bad-asses."





Produced by Marvelous Entertainment, Animation Produced by Madhouse Studios (The Animatrix: Program & World Record, Chobits, Vampire Hunter D)

www.gunslingergirl.tv



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-Chris Tribbey, Home Media Retailing

"Dramatic action matched with a sterling English dub."
-Rob Bricken, Anime Insider

"... especially disconcerting, if not utterly captivating."
-Dave Halverson, Play Magazine

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But every weapon has its flaw...*

The girl has a mechanical body. However, she is still an adolescent child.

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1: Ragazzone Piccola, Armi Grandi: Little Girls, Big Guns

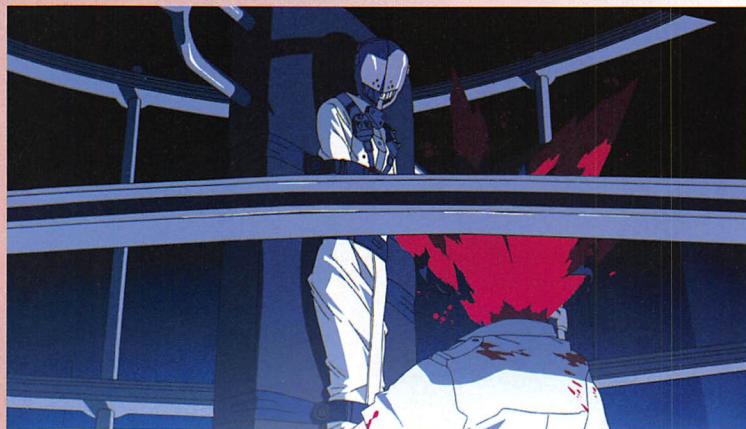
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Elfen Lied

See the crimson sea



You won't be seeing ADV's latest bit of science fiction on Cartoon Network—not when a beautiful, young, naked, slightly mutated girl emerges from a cyber tomb and proceeds to exterminate 23 people in five minutes. And not by normal means—by using her psychic arms to either expel their still-beating hearts, tear them in half, liquefy their insides or systematically sever arms, legs and head, all bathed in blood and set to a somber Gothic overture. It's the bloodiest rampage in anime, all carried out by a 90-pound, pink-haired, teenage girl.

After her escape from said facility, where the harbinger of her condition stands by as his creation decapitates the innocent young girl fetching his coffee before breaching the outer walls, "Lucy" is discovered washed up on a beach by Kohta and Yuke, childhood friends reunited to attend college together. But the girl we meet here is nothing like Lucy. It's her all right, only now she cannot speak a word



(she possesses a low, bone-chilling voice as Lucy), except for a kitty-like "nyu," and has the demeanor of an infant (her first act when Kohta gets her home is to pee on the floor).

Seeing as how she could easily bring about the destruction of mankind (or so we're lead to believe), the first man sent to terminate her is the toughest, meanest piece o' work in the corporate militia: Bandoh. I won't tell you what happens to him, but it's a strangely exhilarating turn of events you don't want to miss. And wait 'til you see who they send in next...

The drama playing in the background



"It's the bloodiest rampage in anime, all carried out by a 90-pound, pink-haired, teenage girl."

is an interesting one too. Kohta lost his little sister to a fatal illness soon after he and Yuka parted ways years before, and unbeknownst to him, she's been secretly in love with him ever since, a fact he is unaware of as he begins playing big brother to a voluptuous, naked, seemingly infantile girl.

Elfen Lied has all the makings of a future classic. It's shockingly brutal like *Texhnolyze* but at the same time innocent in a strange, almost haunting way.

Dave Halverson



Okay, how come this never happens to me?

Elfen Lied

Volume: 1

9.0
Score

Beautiful in its brutality and unique all around. A compelling mix of emotions.

Yuka bugs me; cry me a river... I hope she gets her noggin hacked off soon.

Released by: ADV Films Rating: TV MA

Running Time: 75 minutes Available: May

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Shrine of the Morning Mist

Eyeballs, pratfalls and demon brawls



Poor Tadahiro Amatsu. It's rough growing up with a crimson-colored eye that can see into a demon world; even worse, it leaves him a target for those same demons wanting to acquire him into the fold. Fortunately, upon moving back to his hometown, he's reunited with his childhood sweetheart, Yuzu, who just happens to be a feisty demon-fighting priestess these days. Funny how things like that work out. Still, she and her two sisters can't do it all the time, so why not recruit her best friends to take a shot at it?

Enter tall, prideful Seiko; camera-wielding, short 'n' snarky Chika; rich, mild-mannered Shizuka; and geeky conspiracy theorist Izumi...all of whom never realize exactly what they just signed up for: facing a red-masked demon conjurer whose nose could give Cyrano De Bergerac a run for his money. Yuzu and company face challenges bigger than they ever dreamed—literally. Giant 50-foot ogres and beefy upright-standing animals, anyone? Throw in a morphing cat-girl warrior to spice things up, a healthy dose of comedy to level it out, give it to *Macross Plus* director Yuji Moriyama to lead it out of the

haze, and you end up with a supernatural comedy actioner, such as it is.

The show maintains a delicious balance between the slapstick and serious; romance stays at a puppy love tier between Hiro and Yuzu, greatly reducing any chance of overdrawn melodrama, though it may turn action fan purists away somewhat. *Mist* also has the best use of a bike as an occasional weapon this side of *FLCL*, and takes playful jabs at anime staples like Yaoi and pompously named weapon attacks with great pride. No one is immune to comedic moments: gruff cat-girl Koma has a penchant for cake, and bad-guy Ayatachi's dramatic diatribes are frequently cut short by injury.

Every major character remains likeable and affable, never boring—though hopefully usually placid Hiro won't continue on the self-deprecation trip in further episodes. The music harmonizes sweetly with both action and quiet moments, and the backdrop of a small city escapes frequently to the beautifully rendered natural landscape surrounding it, perfect for fighting centipedes and other squiggly things away from Hiro and his



"The show maintains a delicious balance between the slapstick and serious..."

eyeball. The animation is crisp in design, and colors remain addictingly vibrant throughout, making multiple viewings a pleasure. Though each of the volume's 10 episodes lasts only 12 minutes apiece, the story remains fluid throughout, and feels like a fleshed-out story twice as long. *Azumanga Daioh* and *InuYasha* fans alike will gladly want to wander into this shrine.

Jim Dewey

Shrine of the Morning Mist

Volume: 1

9.0
Score

Spontaneous slapstick and clear, unique identities for the fledgling priestess troupe.

Why hasn't the city run trouble-magnet Hiro out of town on a rail yet?

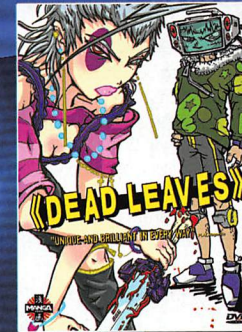
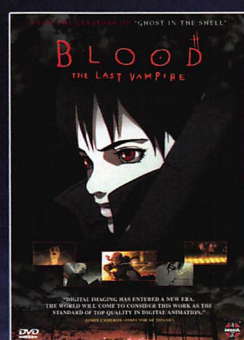
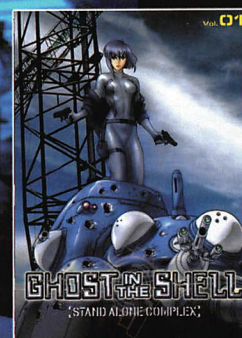
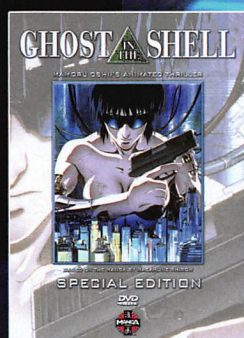
Released by: Anime Works Rating: 13 and up

Running Time: 120 minutes Available: Dec 2004



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Lupin the 3rd: Island of Assassins

Movie

Released by: FUNimation Rating: TV PG Running Time: 90 minutes Available: April

○ Zenigata gets whacked, and Lupin almost bites off more than he can chew... almost.

✗ Well, it's a good one, but it's Lupin. A little tame too. Not his edgiest.

8.0
Score

You could pave a highway with all the *Lupin* DVDs on store shelves, yet somehow, like the Solid Snake of anime, no matter how many adventures we take with him or what year they originally aired (which is '97 in this case), *Lupin* is always a good time.

Having seen more *Lupin* adventures than I care to recount, some things never change. *Lupin*, for instance, cannot be killed, period; and no matter how far he goes or how well secluded he is, Fujiko is always only a few thread counts away. He must have an anal transmitter or something. Jigen is a given, the resilient Zenigata is always in pursuit, and Goemon will show up eventually, but Fujiko, she can smell loot from a continent away...which in *Island of Assassins* is a good thing, seeing as how *Lupin* and company are deep,

"...breaching an island stronghold that would make James Bond crap tight little nuggets..."

deep, deep under cover, breaching an island stronghold that would make James Bond crap tight little nuggets, where a criminal mastermind, Gordeau, is putting on his own production of *Lord of the Flies*, with a major twist (and of course, sitting on a pile of gold). His trained killers, The Tarantulas, can leave to rape and pillage; however, criminals check in but they don't check out, since he's marked them all with poison time-release tattoos. *Island* is no *Cagliostro* or *Dragon of Doom*, but then, what is? As spy capers go, it's another gem. Dave Halverson



Has Lupin finally met his match? No way—barely breaks a sweat.



Scrapped Princess

Volume: 1 - "Family Ties"

Released by: Bandai Entertainment Rating: 13 and up Running Time: 100 minutes Available: April

○ Poignant period drama, slick action and special effects, and scary bakery mascot Mr. Soupy!

✗ It's not a good idea to hang around exiled royalty.

8.0
Score

Imagine having to live your life on the run, wearing disguises, and living with the possibility of being the harbinger of armageddon on your 16th birthday. That's just what curly-locked, excommunicated princess Pacifica Casull has to deal with thanks to a saint's prophecy which may or may not be true; she has to rely on a sibling pair of protectors to ensure she stays in once piece, fend off the pretentious advances of a young, bumbling knight-in-training and keep her chin up even when those she thought trustworthy turn on her. Fortunately, that won't be the case with stoic warrior Shannon and gentle Raquel, who, by the way, has a wickedly short incantation ability (used to great comedic effect) that pulverizes anyone who gets near her royal charge. This still proves a challenge

when young special-ops soldier Chris, brandishing a chained axeblade, tracks her down and kidnaps Pacifica's first friend in ages to lure her out. The series, while in a fictional universe, has a familiar European feel—Romanian carriages, old-world villages and costumes, and a touch of Russian-like royalty, which provides a refreshing alternative in anime. Episode four unleashes the most excitement with startling revelations and a genuinely terrifying entity that jeopardizes a small town's population. With BONES Studio handling animation responsibilities and a story that definitely has limitless potential to grow, it's an intriguing start to what may be the end of a world's existence.

Jim Dewey

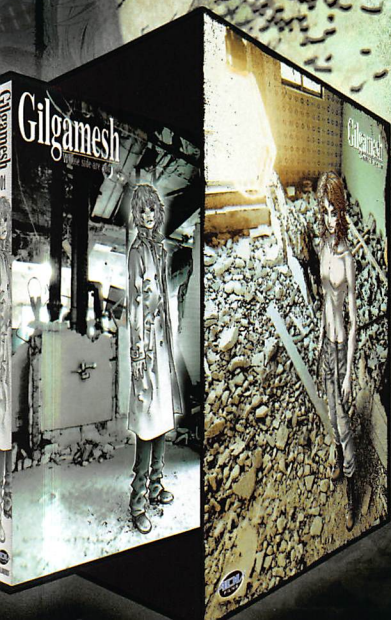
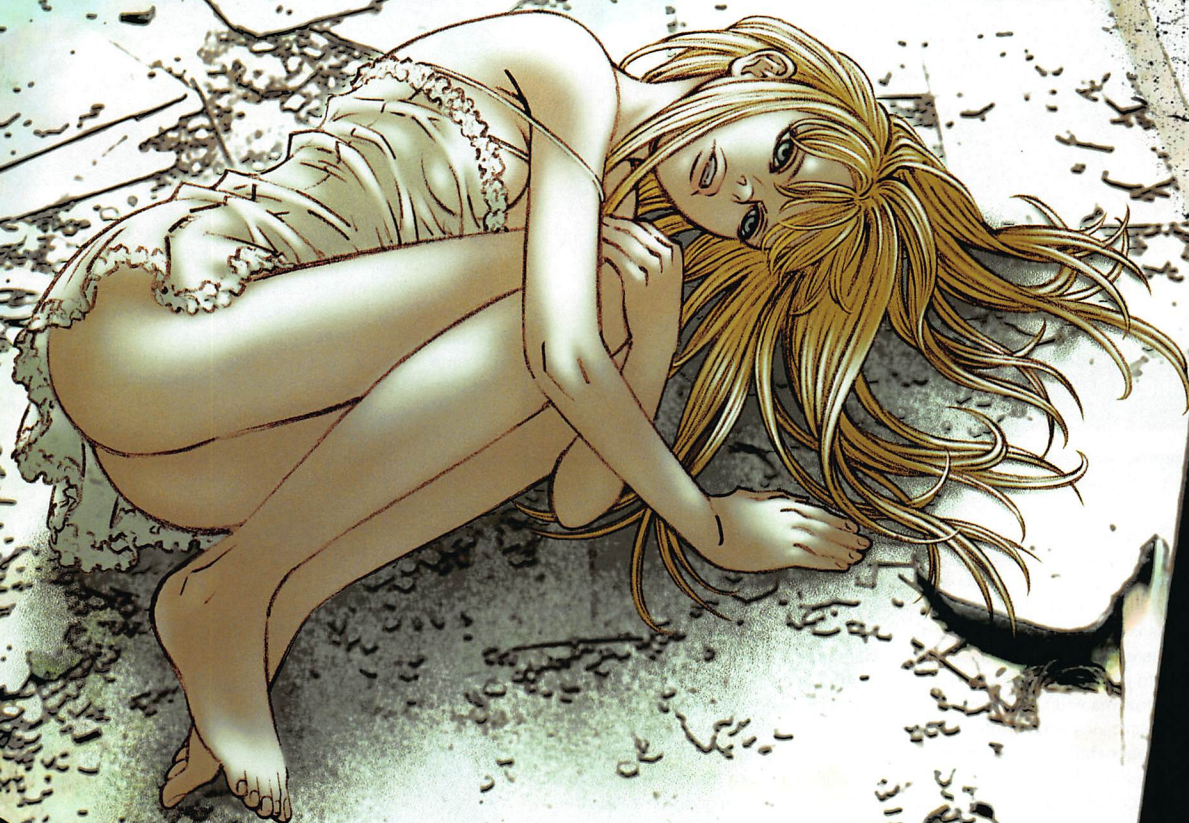


"...an intriguing start to what may be the end of a world's existence."

What looks like a giant killer frog is actually a river deity/giant killer frog...



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Maburaho

Volume: 1

Released by: ADV Films Rating: TV 14 Running Time: 100 minutes Available: April

A great-looking, fresh show from the director of Hand Maid May and Burn Up Excess. Good, bouncy fun. Shiki is pretty much a tool, although it seems there may be more to him than meets the eye.

7.5
Score

Kazuki Shikimori has nice genes—so nice, in fact, that the hottest girls of Aoi Academy want his...er...sea men even though he's a peon in the rank and file of magicians. Aoi is kind of a Hogwarts, if you will, where the cream of the magic-user crop go to hone their skills. But in a world where how many times you can use your magic determines your worth, Shiki is a loser with a paltry MP to his credit (after which he'll turn to dust) where the average is 8000. The hitch is that Shiki happens to come from a long line of the world's most famous and powerful magicians, so his seed is really the prize, hence his newly self-appointed wife, Yuna, whom he wants

nothing to do with; Huriko, a big-boobed horn dog that wants to mount him on the spot; and the ill-tempered Rin, who seems to want to kill him as much as do him. Of course, Shiki is a token prude and therefore actually has issues with this.

After Yuna's marriage fantasy crashes and burns, and a tribunal by the student council (aka his jealous friends) to keep him from procreating fails, he's fair game, but Shiki's just not ready. We'll see about that. *Maburaho* is a good time. Not the deepest, most compelling piece of anime I've seen, but fun and full of surprises.

Dave Halverson

"Of course, Shiki is a token prude and therefore actually has issues with this."



Shura no Toki

Volume 1 - "Age of Chaos"

Released by: Anime Works Rating: 13 and up Running Time: 125 minutes Available: March

Nicely refined digital animation and effects, outstanding soundtrack, progressively deep storyline. Trends on some familiar ground, and Yakumo tends to be annoyingly deadpan, for now.

8.0
Score



After dispensing a group of would-be assassins to protect a young noblewoman, Musashi Miyamoto—considered the king of fighters throughout feudal Japan—passes on an offer to become her personal escort, suggesting to her benefactor that a carefree pedestrian whom he senses has considerable skills take the job instead. Enter Yakumo Mutsu: a Mutsu Enmei master who demands all of five loons for the pleasure. Turns out young Mutsu is able to cut through any opponent in record time, unarmed (if you like long fights, look elsewhere), and so begins the tumultuous relationship/trek of

Shura no Toki.

Essentially taking a myriad of stock scenarios and wadding them into a compelling adventure, *Shura no Toki* combines the meek yet invincible (and, of course, vastly outnumbered) lone protagonist with a reluctant royal, providing protection she doesn't want or feel she needs. A road well traveled, perhaps; however, what seems headed for the typical bodyguard-come-disciple saga takes enough key turns early on to suggest we're in for considerably more, or at the very least, a slick production set to a superb soundtrack. Dave Halverson

"Turns out young Mutsu is able to cut through any opponent in record time, unarmed..."



Never bother a Mutsu Enmei master while he's eating...

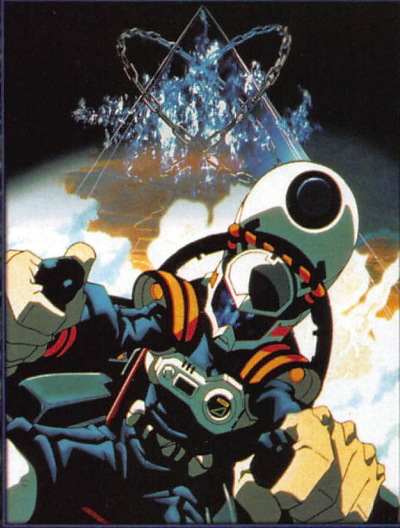


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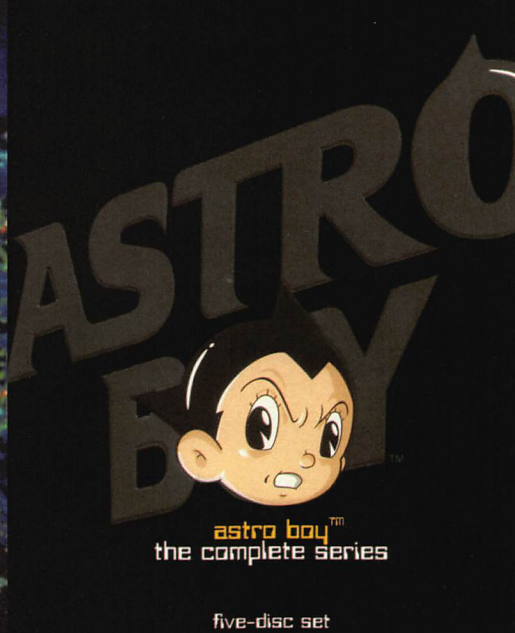
THE COLLECTION



Macross Plus: The Collection

Released by: Manga Entertainment

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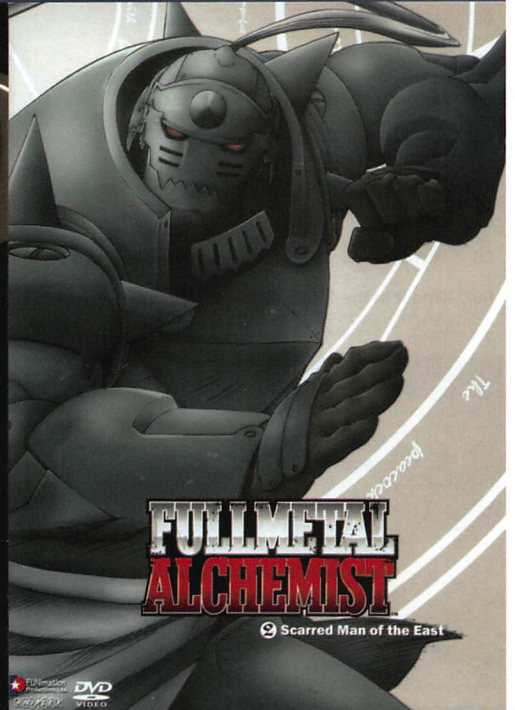
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Released by: Sony Pictures HE

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FULLMETAL
ALCHEMIST

Scarred Man of the East

FullMetal Alchemist

Released by: FUNimation Now Playing: Volume 2 - "Scarred Man of the East"

As if you need me to tell you: FullMetal Alchemist V2 is out now. Aside from the story taking some majorly cool arcs, this is once again among the best-packaged DVDs around, including reversible sleeve art and Alchemy Text Two, yet another awesome art/info book. FUNimation is on a major roll.

read this



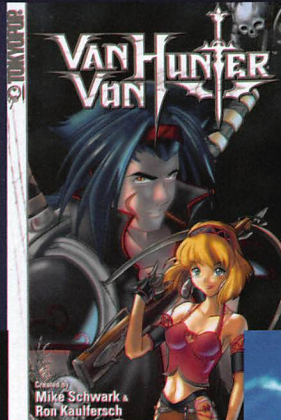
VOLUME 2

Apocalypse Zero

Publisher: AnimeWorks

Now Reading: Volume 2

In the radiation-plagued mutant zone of Apocalypse Zero—the down and dirtiest demon-filled hell on earth—one man, Kakugo Hagakure, stands against legions of vile beasts and the innocent people they consume. A monumentally cool manga for 18 and older horror fans (with a strong stomach).

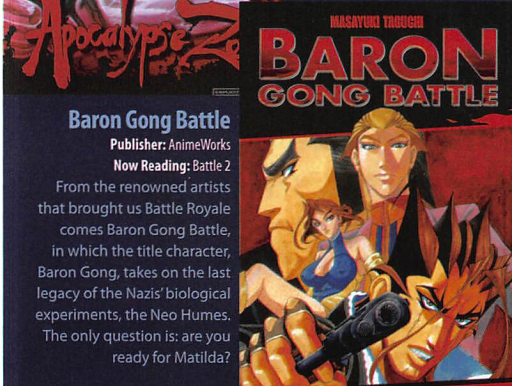


Van Von Hunter

Publisher: TokyoPop

Now Reading: Volume 1

The winners in T-Pop's Rising Stars of Manga contest do their best to combine pop culture and dark ages adventure (we're certainly not in Japan or Korea anymore), resulting in an odd Dave the Barbarian-meets-Krull-style ruckus. Beware the "rising stars."



MASAYUKI THOUGH

BARON
GONG BATTLE

Baron Gong Battle

Publisher: AnimeWorks

Now Reading: Battle 2

From the renowned artists that brought us Battle Royale comes Baron Gong Battle, in which the title character, Baron Gong, takes on the last legacy of the Nazis' biological experiments, the Neo Humes. The only question is: are you ready for Matilda?

Gunparade March

Publisher: AnimeWorks

Now Reading: Last Dance Gunparade

Based on the popular series, Gunparade March chronicles how the young cadets of unit 5121 sort out their lives in between their day job of saving the world when the invading Genjyu attack. Mecha action, drama, comedy and, of course, a little fan service.



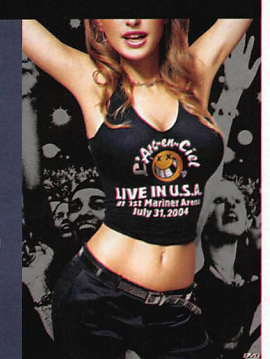
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L'Arc-en-Ciel Live in the USA

Publisher: Tofu Records Available: May 31

One of the best rock bands on the planet, which happens to be Japanese, makes a rare U.S. appearance when they light up a dome-load of rabid fans at Baltimore's Mariner Arena, including their hit from FullMetal Alchemist (which sounds amazing live), "Ready Steady Go." Do not miss this very special, very different concert DVD.



animedatabase

Virgin Megastore Top Ten

- 01 **Appleseed** *geneon entertainment*
- 02 **Porco Rosso** *buena vista home entertainment*
- 03 **Full Metal Panic** *adv films*
- 04 **Neon Genesis Evangelion** *adv films*
- 05 **Ninja Scroll TV Box Set** *urban vision*
- 06 **Otogi Zoshi** *media blasters*
- 07 **Porco Rosso** *buena vista home entertainment*
- 08 **Spirited Away** *buena vista home entertainment*
- 09 **Ghost in the Shell: SAC** *manga/bandai entertainment*
- 10 **Ghost in the Shell 2: Innocence** *dreamworks*



Play Magazine Top Ten

- 01 **Elfen Lied** *adv films*
- 02 **Gilgamesh** *adv films*
- 03 **FullMetal Alchemist** *funimation productions*
- 04 **Burst Angel** *funimation productions*
- 05 **Gunslinger Girl** *funimation productions*
- 06 **Tenjho Tenge** *geneon entertainment*
- 07 **Gantz** *adv films*
- 08 **Shrine of the Morning Mist** *animeworks*
- 09 **Scrapped Princess** *bandai entertainment*
- 10 **Paranoia Agent** *geneon entertainment*



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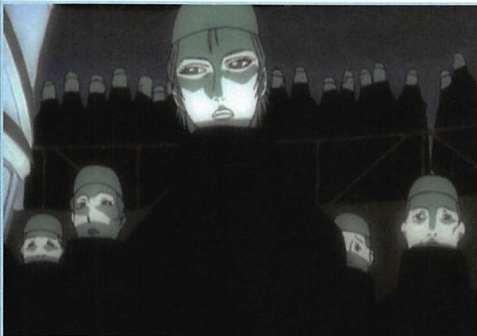


Appleseed
geneon entertainment

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Dave Halverson

- 01 **Gilgamesh** *adv films*
- 02 **Burst Angel** *funimation productions*
- 03 **Samurai Champloo** *geneon entertainment*
- 04 **Tenjho Tenge** *geneon entertainment*
- 05 **Astro Boy Complete Collection** *columbia tristar*



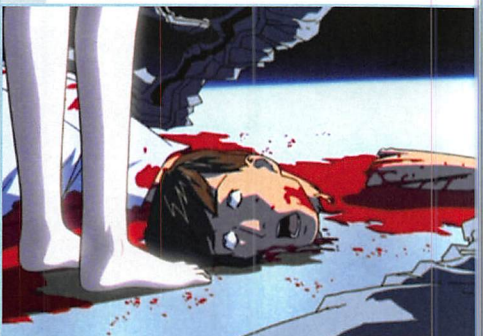
Jim Dewey

- 01 **Lupin the 3rd: Island of Assassins** *funimation prod.*
- 02 **Cromartie High School** *adv films*
- 03 **R.O.D -the TV-** *geneon entertainment*
- 04 **Ghost in the Shell: SAC** *manga/bandai entertainment*
- 05 **Samurai Champloo** *geneon entertainment*



Nelson Lui

- 01 **Elfen Lied** *adv films*
- 02 **The Melody of Oblivion** *geneon entertainment*
- 03 **Samurai Champloo** *geneon entertainment*
- 04 **Daphne in the Brilliant Blue** *geneon entertainment*
- 05 **Scrapped Princess** *bandai entertainment*



Readers' Anime Top Five

- 01 **Appleseed** *geneon entertainment*
- 02 **Samurai Champloo** *geneon entertainment*
- 03 **Ghost in the Shell: SAC** *manga/bandai entertainment*
- 04 **FullMetal Alchemist** *funimation productions*
- 05 **Gantz** *adv films*

Play Magazine Manga Top Five

- 01 **Apocalypse Zero** *animeworks*
- 02 **Baron Gong Battle** *animeworks*
- 03 **Sgt. Frog** *tokyopop manga*
- 04 **Heaven Above** *tokyopop manga*
- 05 **Galaxy Angel** *broccoli*

Play Magazine Music Top Five

- 01 **Yoko Ishida - All of Me** *geneon anime music*
- 02 **Moonlit Memoirs OST 2** *geneon anime music*
- 03 **Memories** *geneon anime music*
- 04 **Sound Wave of Stellvia** *geneon anime music*
- 05 **Sonic Heroes OST** *geneon anime music*

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play MEDIA

Team America: World Police - Uncensored and Unrated

Starring: Matt Stone, Trey Parker, Kristen Miller, Daran Norris, Maurice LaMarche (voices)

Directed by: Trey Parker

Released By: Paramount Home Ent.

Rated: NR

At the time of its theatrical release, *Team America: World Police* offered a socially relevant satirical look at the lunatic asylum that followed the invasion of Iraq and subsequent intimidation from everyone's favorite cartoon dictator, Kim Jong Il, along with a cavalcade of payback for a gaggle of Hollywood activists, aptly coined Film Actors Guild (check the acronym), including Alec Baldwin, Tim Robbins, Sean Penn—who wasn't at all amused—and Janeane Garofalo, who exclaims: "As actors, it is our responsibility to read the newspaper and then repeat what we read on television like it's our own opinion." See: instant classic. Team America is an elite counter-terrorism strike force, HQed inside of Mt. Rushmore, who kill terrorists that utter Team South Park's own brand of gibberish like "Durka Durka Muhammad



Jihad" amidst a potty-mouthed puppet parody of every film Jerry Bruckheimer has ever made, although he's never made one even close to this good. I only wish I could elaborate on the soundtrack and lyrics, skewering of the French, puppet sex and so on, but I'll leave that immense joy to you. This is also one DVD where the extras (including one very special extended scene) tell their own amazing story.

Dave Halverson

Movie: A **Extras:** A



National Treasure

Starring: Nicholas Cage, Jon Voight, Harvey Keitel

Director: Jon Turteltaub

Released By: Walt Disney Home Ent.

Rated: PG

In Disney's *National Treasure*, aka *Goonies* for adults, nobody gets hurt, the good guys win, the law has a heart, and the bad guys go to jail. There's never any doubt as to what's going to happen; it's more about how Bruckheimer and company get us there, which, as it turns out is pretty fun. The bad guys shoot a lot, but in true Hollywood PG fashion never hit anything (other than the odd prop for effect), and there are plenty of cat-and-mouse games to keep us wide-eyed but don't look for much else. The

story about a family that's spent several generations chasing a treasure supposedly hidden by our forefathers (who it turns out were the original Goonies—low tech wizards) ultimately falls to Nicholas Cage's Benjamin Franklin Gates, who learns the map is written in invisible ink (break out the lemon juice) on the back of the Declaration of Independence. Nick and his sidekick approach obtaining it an analytical/MacGuyver way, while his investor/really mean bad guy investor approaches it with the usual mixture of goons and guns. *National Treasure's* like cinematic Chinese food, so be sure and fill up on the scads of extras, especially the making-of and "Knights of Templar" featurettes...you might just learn something. I did.

Dave Halverson

Movie: C+ **Extras:** B



Be Cool

Starring: John Travolta, Uma Thurman, Vince Vaughn, The Rock

Director: F. Gary Gray

Released By: MGM Home Ent.

Rated: PG-13

Ah, Chili Palmer...why is he "cool" again? Is it because he's stupidly and blindly fearless, or is it his sugar daddy way of getting his peeps what they need with a shit-eatin' grin and self-imposed street cred? I remember when he really was cool, clever and always one step ahead of the goons. That film was called *Get Shorty*. *Be Cool* comes across as anything but, as Chili veers into wannabe territory, giddy as a school girl to get next to Steven Tyler who, in an embarrassing turn, takes that last step down sell-out lane in the most

hackneyed ill-conceived concert scenario I have ever witnessed, as the producers do their best to rub up against Blake Edwards but fall embarrassingly short. Every actor in this film seemed as if they were on vacation. I swear Danny DeVito was reading directly off cue cards. *Be Cool* relies solely on performances by The Rock and Vince Vaughn as a gay bodyguard and pimped-out white guy respectively, and while they're great, they can't erase a procession of black Hummers filled with gun-toting behemoth homies, Keitel as a wimpy, spineless boutique record executive, or Uma—after an amazing turn in *Kill Bill*—signing up to desecrate her turn in *Pulp Fiction*. The extras aren't so cool either, except for some pretty cool close-ups and The Rock's happenin' music video. Dave Halverson

Movie: C **Extras:** B

BoogeyMan

Starring: Lucy Lawless, Skye McCole Bartusiak, Barry Watson
Director: Stephen T. Kay
Released By: Sony Pictures Home Entertainment
Rated: PG-13

Boogeyman is a cheap psychological horror movie riddled with clichés that twist into an incoherent mess. It takes time out for those lovely low-rent scenes that look like well-lit soap opera moments saddled with actors hand-picked from the local college Greek scene. The director likes to shoot pointless close-ups and severe

angles, right around the moment things crash and make weird noises. But you know what? The movie almost works, thriving on a few nifty scenes and a throwback style that sparks your attention if you go in for this type of stupid fun. A story about the Boogeyman terrorizing kids into their adulthood couldn't have been any more predictable, and inevitably brain dead, but the occasional clever jolt keeps the heart pumping. Brady Fiechter

Movie: C **Extras:** C+



Darkness

Starring: Ana Paquin, Lena Olin
Director: Jaime Balagueró
Released By: Dimension Home Video
Rated: NR

As painfully slow, drab "psychological" thrillers go, *Darkness* reigns supreme as the most clueless, contrived piece of cinema since *Scream*... But this is supposed to be serious. In this oh-so-badly-wants-to-be-*The-Shining*-without-snow-or-a-hedge waste of time, mom's the poster child for Prozac (a dimmer bulb does not exist than Olin's oblivious housewife) and dad has some weird violent outburst disease, neither of which

is any excuse for also having no brains. They've moved into a house in the Spanish countryside that Gozer probably uses in summer, where the *Darkness* moves pencils, chokes their 5-year old and scurries across hallways in clumsy slasher-movie style. Oh, and the lights flicker but the wiring is okay...these people deserve to be harassed by dead children. But even when their daughter (Paquin) finds out the place is ritual central—a decapitation station for little kids (like her brother, who's suddenly taken to drawing children with their heads being severed), all thanks to grandpa no less—these dimwits still go home and do their best *Shining* impression. Watch *The Grudge* again or, better yet, go find *Saw*. Dave Halverson

Movie: D **Extras:** D-



Prozac Nation

Starring: Cristina Ricci, Jason Biggs, Anne Heche
Director: Erik Skjoldbjærg
Released By: Miramax
Rated: R

Unleashing her best and first truly adult performance, a devastating Cristina Ricci plays Lizzie, a freshman at Harvard helplessly struggling with tragic depression. "Some days I wake up and just feel so flat out f***ed up that I'll do anything to feel different," she tells her newfound roommate/friend and support, Kelley (Michelle Williams), whose boyfriend eventually falls victim to Lizzie's self-destructive sexuality. Gradually losing her grip on reality and falling deeper into a hole widened by her anxiety-ridden mother, Lizzie finds comfort in her writing, which lands her a gig with Rolling Stone. But after losing her friends and boyfriend to her unhinged outbreaks, Lizzie eventually shatters under drug abuse and self-loathing, failing to even find salvation in her work. Her therapist's (Anne Heche) solution: level off with the new drug Prozac. She has become a legion of the "prozac nation," the movie's fitting title and book on which the true-life story was based. As the drug begins to take its effect, the movie conveniently ends, which is unfortunate, given its inability to more densely explore the issues it deals with. It's uncomfortable watching this poor soul hobbled with such immense pain, turning every possible positive into a destructive negative; anyone who can relate will likely find the drama heightened. If the characters and situations they find themselves in seem straight out of the depression-movie template, that's one of *Prozac Nation*'s biggest lumps, and the movie fails to move around them

Undertow

Starring: Jamie Bell, Josh Lucas, Dermot Mulroney
Director: David Gordon Green
Released By: MGM
Rated: R

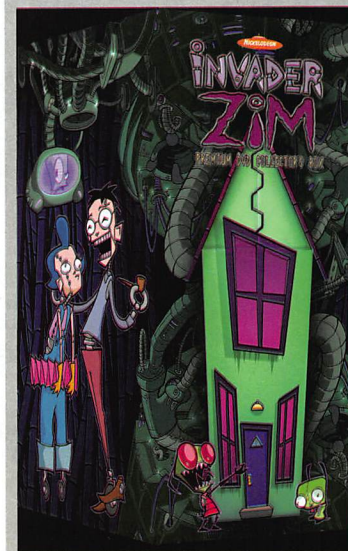
In the lyrical, deeply entertaining thriller *Undertow*, two brothers and their isolationist father get a visit from uncle



Invader Zim Premium DVD Collectors Box

Released By: Media Blasters

Not only is *Invader Zim* one of the edgiest, most happenin' cartoons ever, now it's available in a house! Inside the box, a shiny reproduction of Zim's house awaits with a bonus figurine in the attic and four very special DVDs inside, including a bonus DVD packed with interviews and never-before-seen-and-heard Zim antics.



by sticking to the softer surface of its characters and plot. But when the film simply rings true, there's no denying the harshest scars sometimes lie in the most ordinary struggles of every day life. Extras: Anatomy of a scene.

Brady Fiechter
Movie: B **Extras:** D

Deel (a devilish Josh Lucas), fresh out of prison and full of portent. We anxiously prepare for something terrible to disrupt the quiet intrigue, and then the horrific happens, sending the boys on the run through the beautifully photographed rural Southern landscape of pig farms, junk pits and soiled dirt paths—a place that becomes their mythical playground. The film and its strong performances find some expected turns, taking time to explore mood and uncanny dialogue that delivers a poetic subtext. When *Undertow* veers into the predictable and toys with strained convention, it's not for lack of emotion; the movie leaves a mark. Extras: Deleted scenes, audio commentary by David Gordon Green and co-star Jamie Bell, featurette. Brady Fiechter

Movie: B+ **Extras:** C+



Madagascar

Let the summer movie games begin



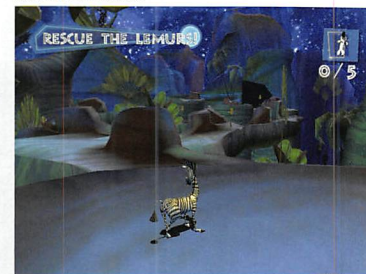
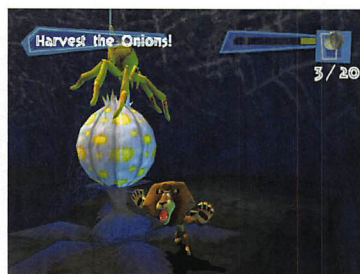
There's something innocent and unsullied about a movie game like Madagascar. Games for kids and/or kicky-jumpy-punchy lovers being the minority these days, it's nice to see they're not completely extinct: endangered maybe, but kickin' nevertheless.

From Activision, creators of all things open-area and task-based, Madagascar follows suit in the paw and hoof steps of the (deftly impersonated) cast from the movie, Marty the Zebra (Chris Rock), Alex the Lion (Ben Stiller), Gloria the Hippo (Jada Pinkett Smith), Melman the Giraffe (David Schwimmer) and a gaggle of fly-fishing penguins.

Following an itinerary in accord with the film, the gameplay is nicely varied, built on Gloria's ability to butt-bash and speed burst after wolfing down red peppers, Marty's jump dash and powerful kick,

Alex's double jump and roar and Melman's head-smash and helicopter spin and hover. Though simplistic on the technical side, the animation and overall feel is tight as was the music and level design in the three areas I sampled. Do I wish it looked like Star Fox Adventures or Conker, had shimmering water and normal-mapped textures? You bet, but in the grand scheme of things, a good, solid, fun game to run alongside this summer's CG powerhouse will suffice to get things rolling. Next up: Batman Begins, Star Wars Episode III and Fantastic Four, followed by Aeon Flux and the real 800 lb. gorilla, King Kong. Herbie can't be far behind.

Here's a smidgen of insight as to the how and why of Madagascar with Toys for Bob's senior designer Mike Ebert Dave Halverson



Missions like finding lemurs and harvesting onions replace the seedier stylings of most free-roamers.

Interview

Mike Ebert, senior designer, Toys for Bob



play: Tell us about Toys for Bob... Who are you, when did you get together, what have you done, and what's with the name?

Mike Ebert: We like to call it "TFB" or "Dante's Inferno," depending on how close we are to a deadline! We've got people from all walks of life, but the one thing we all have in common is... we can't leave! No, no, we like to make games and play games! Before Madagascar, we did a fun skateboarding game, but people here have been working in games for a long time. We have people here who worked on games back in the Commodore 64 era. And Bob? He's the man. The one that won't let us leave.

What's the golden rule to make sure Madagascar hits home with the movie crowd?

When making games based on movies, obviously you want to include as many elements from the film as possible. But, more important is to make the game fun, and to do that you often have to deviate from film. We add new characters, change

the story, do whatever is necessary to make the game a fun experience, even for people who have never seen the movie. If the game is really fun, most people will embrace any deviations from the film.

So having to adhere to the story as much as possible can limit you creatively...

It makes designing the game a lot more challenging for us. We can't just fall back on many standard game experiences: shooting guns, driving cars, causing general mayhem to the environment. We actually have to think of new experiences that work within the context of the film. So if the movie is about zoo animals, we can't use missile firing, flying, space robots! Uh...except for that secret space game we snuck in, in which you have a spaceship and shoot missiles at alien robots.

The character switching and open level design are well suited. Is this the game

"You're always given some guidelines... Activision wouldn't let us make 'Madagascar, the network real-time strategy game.'"

you'd have made in any case?

A few years ago, this sort of gameplay would seem very revolutionary, today though it's kind of expected in a product. It offers the player a sense of freedom to explore and experience the game however they desire. I think everyone at TFB loves to make games like this.

I'll take that as a yes. In this case, were you given free reign as the developer or given a firm directive?

What's the licensor-publisher-developer relationship like on a project like this?

You're always given some guidelines: what is the target market for the game, the game experience? Activision wouldn't let us make "Madagascar, the network real-time strategy game." They had a pretty good idea the sort of game they wanted.

Oh damn, and I really wanted that... How involved has DreamWorks been

in the creation of the game? Was there one thing they wanted you to absolutely nail?

It was refreshing to work with a movie company that has a lot of game knowledge. They gave us room to run with our own ideas and, when necessary, reined us back in. They really wanted the zoo animals to behave true to the film, so we worked with them to make sure none of the animals behaved in a way that was "out of character."

What was it like working with PDI?

PDI (Pacific Data Images) was great. They provided us with a wealth of reference materials as well as the ability to view early movie footage. They even allowed our animators to come down and spend a week actually working on-site at PDI. People working on the film made sure our animators captured the look and style of the characters. [play](#)

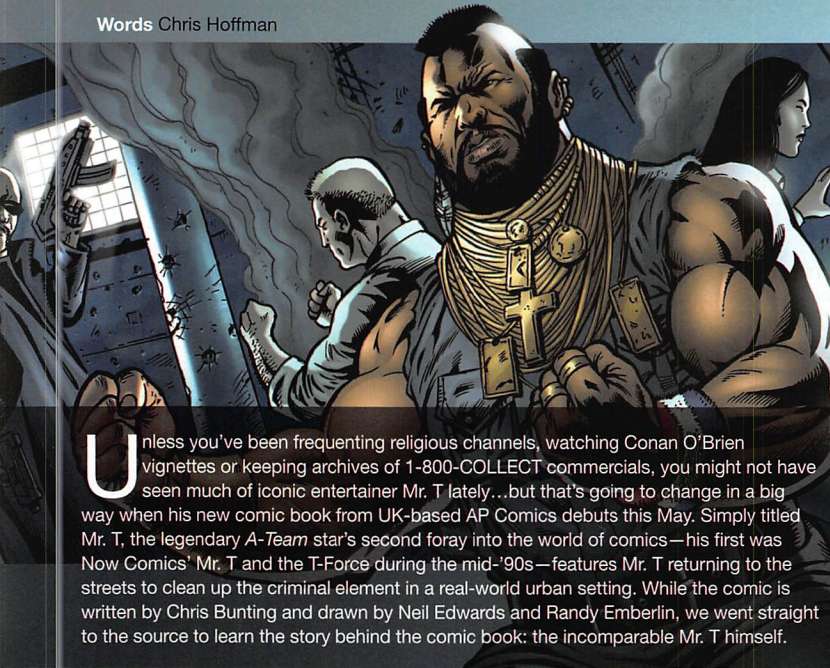
The paparazzi must be close behind...



The Mr. T Experience

Quit your jibba-jabba and read his comic!

Words Chris Hoffman



Unless you've been frequenting religious channels, watching Conan O'Brien vignettes or keeping archives of 1-800-COLLECT commercials, you might not have seen much of iconic entertainer Mr. T lately...but that's going to change in a big way when his new comic book from UK-based AP Comics debuts this May. Simply titled *Mr. T*, the legendary *A-Team* star's second foray into the world of comics—his first was *Now Comics' Mr. T* and the *T-Force* during the mid-'90s—features Mr. T returning to the streets to clean up the criminal element in a real-world urban setting. While the comic is written by Chris Bunting and drawn by Neil Edwards and Randy Emberlin, we went straight to the source to learn the story behind the comic book: the incomparable Mr. T himself.

play: Where'd the idea for the comic come from? Did you have the idea, or did AP Comics come to you?

Mr. T: They came to me. They came to me. Like they said, "You build it, they will come." I've been built and molded by my maker, God, and they see it's true... For me, it is a platform and you get my message. I tell people what the T stands for—I'm tough and tender. Tough when I have to be and tender when I should be, you know. So get that message out... Really, what my character's going to be like [is] a normal guy, and then we'll switch it when I put my gold on. My gold will be my uniform. Put my gold on, I'm going to war. You know, my gold, can't nothing get to me, blocking. It'll be like Wonder Woman with all her stuff.

So is this aimed more at kids or more for older readers who have been following your career since the '80s? It's gonna be something for everybody. I don't wanna just say "OK, just be good." It's me, doing what I'm doing: good

against evil, good against bad. I'm more of a neighborhood hero than a superhero. I want to deal with school bullies, you know, neighborhood gangs, child molesters, carjackers, drug dealers. In an episode, maybe in the future, talk about terrorism on a plane, have my character on the plane, dealing with that...

What's your part in the comic as creative supervisor?

If I don't like it—sort of reminds me of this commercial about Hanes many years ago. There was this fat lady at the end, she said, "They don't say Hanes until I say they say Hanes." So what I do—I say hey, I don't like that. That's not me... We don't need to be fightin' space aliens; I don't want to have five grenades in each hand. This is what we use: low-key superhero. We got enough superheroes flyin' around this and that...

Is any of this going to be based on your real-life experiences?

Not like stuff when I was growing up...

We wanted something more topical. Something going on today. The rappers here, we got a concert, some kid got trampled. Real stuff. Some rapper came into town, this and that and gunfire—bang!—you know... Somebody got shot at the concert; somebody got carjacked. They can relate to that, you know.

Do you think you might write some dialogue in the future, just for fun maybe?

Oh yeah! Not just for fun, just for more accuracy. Get it right, you know. Cuz there's gotta be parts in there—"Hey fool!" And like I'm saying the thing—"Don't gimme no jibba-jabba!" You know, so I got to have my flair.

Is it just gonna be you against the bad guys, or will you have allies or sidekicks?

No. Maybe later on. Maybe down the line I might recruit somebody. I figure there should be maybe somebody in the neighborhood, not like a schoolboy or something, like maybe an old grandma, you know, that's pulling my coattails, let me know what's going down. Maybe she hears some stuff, the little kids say, "Look, a kid came to school with rock cocaine," and I say, "OK, I'll be there." So maybe, but that could only work in so many episodes. Or maybe, you know, get an Officer Friendly...

One thing I noticed about the comic is on the cover to issue #2, there's some guy punching you out! Since when does that happen?

See, you want that because I'm a neighborhood hero. Neighborhood heroes do get punched... It's not how many times you get knocked down; it's how many



An interior page from *Mr. T* #1. Some fools are gonna be pitied.



times you get up. So a superhero's gonna get beat up; like in the movie *Rocky*, he's the hero, he got beat up a lot. I beat the daylights out of him! But he won!

Are your views on religion going to be part of the comic book?

Everybody's going to know that I'm a Christian. They're gonna have a scene where I'm praying, my character's praying... That's me. They got to show it. Otherwise I'll have to put on the brakes...

So why should people buy the comic book?

That's a good question. First thing, they should never buy the comic book because of my pretty face—ha, ha, ha! That was a joke, you know, cuz anybody can laugh about that. But the main thing is, that's why everything I do I take pride in...because I'm putting it out there, somebody's going to buy it... Another thing we wanna hit, is we wanna hit through the black community. Because the black community, like I said, has never really been into comic books...

Is there anything else you want to say about the comic?

As Tony the Tiger would say, it's GRRRRREAT! I pity the fool who don't get my comic book, read it and enjoy it! OK? Have a good day! Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha! **play**

"I pity the fool who don't get my comic book, read it and enjoy it!" -Mr. T

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Interview Yuzo Koshiro

Burning the Midnight Oil

The legendary game composer returns with epic racing trance

Words Mike Griffin

Namco's Wangan Midnight series, a hyper-stylized street racer based on the long-running Kodansha manga, has been one of Japan's hottest arcade titles in recent years. The hotly anticipated sequel, Wangan Midnight Maximum Tune 2,



is rolling out worldwide through April and May. The sequel introduces a huge story mode, new tracks and licensed vehicles, and tons of car customization that players will save to their rewritable Tuning Card. Maximum Tune 2 also features one of the best melodic trance soundtracks we've heard in years, composed by one of gaming's finest musical talents, Yuzo Koshiro.

The composer of such classics as the original Ys soundtrack, the Streets of Rage series, Act Raiser 1 and 2 and Shenmue, Yuzo Koshiro has been dazzling listeners for almost two decades with timeless head-nodding electronica and emotionally charged orchestral masterworks. We spoke with Yuzo about his new double-CD release, the state of game music production today and life as a composer.



play: Let's start by talking about your latest release: the Wangan Midnight Maximum Tune 2 CD soundtrack. You've created some really strong electronic anthems here. Why is high-energy trance music such a perfect match for the racing genre?

"Since Wangan Midnight is not only a racing game...trance music with dramatic melodies are much more suitable for it than mechanical techno music."

Yuzo Koshiro: I think electronic music and racing games have been a good match ever since Namco released the original Ridge Racer in the old days. Since Wangan Midnight is not only a racing game, but also one with a story mode like you would see in an adventure game, trance music with dramatic melodies are much more suitable for it than mechanical techno music.

Did Namco specify the type of music they wanted for the game, or were you allowed to freely choose the style of music? Are you working on a future racing title with Namco?

For the most part, the director from Namco had to choose the music style, because the music had a very close link with the situations in the game. And there hasn't been any plans released about the future project just yet.

Generally speaking, what's more difficult in game soundtrack composition these

Some of Yuzo's highlights

Act Raiser



Act Raiser's orchestral score absolutely floored players. Yuzo was using virtually every one of the SNES' sample channels to pump out symphonic instruments.

Shenmue



Yuzo Koshiro contributed 15 songs to the Shenmue soundtrack, renewing his relationship with Sega and working side-by-side with Yu Suzuki on his costly mega-project.

Streets of Rage 2



In the Streets of Rage series, Yuzo milked every ounce of musical processing power from the relatively limited Genesis FM synth chip, resulting in some of the best music of the 16-bit era.

Tuning Card



Arcade players use their rewritable Tuning Card to save game data earned in Namco's Wangan Midnight Maximum Tune 2. Unlocked cars, specific customizations and even ranking can be retained.

Review

Yuzo Koshiro

Wangan Midnight Maximum 2 Original Soundtrack



Dex (Japan)

Ardent electronic music fans would probably agree that the sub-genre known as trance enjoyed a peak of sorts about six or seven years ago. Ministry of Sound and Global Underground were rolling out some great comps, and the music itself was fresh and creative—with a harder edge that satisfied both club and warehouse crowds. There's something vibrant and pure about the energy of quality melodic trance, and Yuzo Koshiro re-captures that aura on his Wangan Midnight Maximum Tune 2 soundtrack album. These songs were composed as a racing game score—a unique racer with dialog and drama—and the album's pace and atmosphere couldn't be more apropos. The first disc is worth the price of admission, with over 65 minutes of deep, cohesive and expansive electronic assembly. Highlights include the rapid build and two-tier chorus of "Maximum Acceleration," with its laser-grade synth flourish and rolling texture flows, and the huge sweeping harmonic peaks of "Blue Blazes." There are playful moments here as well, often tempered by a Japanese pop vibe, as evinced on "Stream of Tears" and "Until the Excitement Cools Down."

The second disc doesn't fare quite as well, marred slightly by lack of focus and Paula Terry's shaky vocals, but Yuzo covers more musical territory here—adding some live instrument sounds and hints of electro. His orchestral training also comes to fore on the fantastic tracks "Last Utopia" and "Holy Land Anthem," bathed in pillow pads, warm rhodes, and sumptuous string tones. As the disc's closing anchor, these songs easily compensate for previous transgressions.

Yuzo Koshiro fans and electronic music listeners would do well to pursue a copy of the Wangan Midnight Maximum Tune 2 soundtrack at their favorite import shop. Despite a few hiccups on the second leg of this huge two-hour-plus double-CD, there are far too many great tracks, trance or otherwise, to miss out. **MG**

Score 8.5/10

"On the other hand, it seems that licensed music is becoming the big thing in games these days. It's different in Japan though..."

days: writing good electronic or good orchestral? Do fans of each type of music have very strong expectations?

For electronic music, a great deal of knowledge about synthesizers and recording methods doesn't necessarily dictate the music quality. The more difficult part is the technique of combining the two. Regarding orchestral music, people tend to want richer sound like the Giga Sampler library. You need a very fast computer and a high-capacity hard drive when you use it. That hardware and the libraries are very expensive, and setting them up correctly just as you want is often more troublesome than the scoring and orchestration. I think fans of all types of game music are very picky and have a good ear for sound quality these days.

Given your penchant for composing across all major genres of music, you must work with a ton of different studio utilities. What type of music-related software and hardware do you use in your personal studio right now?

Regarding software, it's Steinberg Nuendo, Halion, RGC Audio z3ta+, ReFX Vanguard, and for hardware I use a Waldorf Q, Roland JP-8000 and Access Virus-C. These were mainly used in the creation of the Wangan Midnight music.

You are a true veteran of game music, and longtime fans have followed your career since the latter days of 8-bit systems and the original Ys soundtrack. Compared to when you first started working back in the late '80s, how has the game industry changed today in terms of the business of game soundtrack production?

When I first started my career, you had to have knowledge of the programming techniques of onboard sound chips when you created game music. But now, those kinds of special skills are no longer needed because CD and DVD have become the standard in playing game music. And with more people being able to easily make game music, budgets becoming tighter, and people wanting better sound quality, the game music industry is experiencing a much fiercer competition. On the other hand, it seems that licensed music is becoming the big thing in games these days. It's different

in Japan though; most game fans still love traditional game music. There are many talented game composers and the fans are still very much addicted to their work. For example, millions of people around the world who play Final Fantasy games are already very familiar with its music, and Uematsu-san—Final Fantasy's composer—even has a lot of devoted fans outside Japan.

Do you ever miss those days, when you had to program the nuts and bolts of a console to create cool music?

Oh yes, but now I prefer today's freedom and the technology of music creation to the old systems.

The next generation of consoles will include multi-core CPUs. Technology experts have said that it will be difficult to program for architectures like the Cell. Do you think this complexity will filter down to the creation of game music and sound effects?

First of all, there won't be any compromise when you create music. Sound...I don't think you would run into restrictions or limitations at all thanks to larger memory and lighter CPU usage. There won't be much of a difference in terms of playing game music other than the increasing complexity of music interactivity.

When you have free time to compose music, just for fun and personal satisfaction, what kind of music do you usually create?

Orchestral music! That's my favorite genre.

What type of general music have you been listening to lately, and what games have you been playing for kicks?

I have started to listen to a lot of trance music due to my recent work, and I love playing Hyper Street Fighter II...every day.

Finally, it's the golden question as far as your western fans go, and it's the game series we absolutely refuse to allow to fade away: will you and Ancient ever get together to develop another Streets of Rage (Bare Knuckle) game?

I want to do so, if possible.

Unlike some unrealistic franchise resurrections, there's a good chance that a new Streets of Rage would do quite well in sales over here. Maybe on PSP or next-gen consoles?

I think that we must have more fans voice their opinion to get the game companies to create Bare Knuckle again.

You heard him, folks. Get those letters and emails going to Sega, and let's bring a new Streets of Rage to future systems. We sincerely thank Yuzo Koshiro for taking the time to speak with us. He is a class act and a true talent in the industry...and if the Midnight Maximum Tune 2 soundtrack is any indication, Yuzo hasn't lost a step.

Garbage

Bleed Like Me

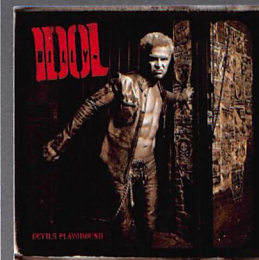


Geffen

Garbage with sampling, dropping rock bombs, hyper ballads and infectious pop? Shirley Manson's sultry whispersmith, sexy monotone and rock-goddess timbre are even more distinguished when the boys in the band exercise their right to mix it up.

Billy Idol

Devil's Playground



Sanctuary

Some relics are best left undisturbed; not the case with Billy Idol, who, instead of cowering to the hollow halls of alt rock, just made a Billy Idol record. Shades of "Eyes Without a Face" surface in the anthemic "Rat Race," or you can indulge yourself in the Dusty "Plastic Jesus" ... but don't hate Billy because he drinks booze out of a JC flask.

Yoko Ishida

All of Me



GreenMusic

On Yoko Ishida's latest, All of Me—a collection of new, original material and TV anime themes—the pop idol/ anime songstress' pop sound is as infectious as ever, from the Sonic the Hedgehog-sounding "Passionate Goddess" to the somber *Texhnolyze* fin. If this CD doesn't make you happy, you may be dead.

A man in a black shirt and jeans is playing a red Fender Precision Bass guitar. He is leaning forward, focused on his playing. In the background, another man in a black shirt and jeans is crouching, looking towards the camera with a surprised expression. The setting appears to be a rehearsal space or a stage with wooden floors and walls.

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you'd swear it's live.

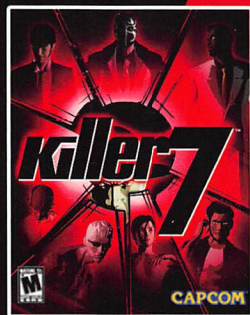
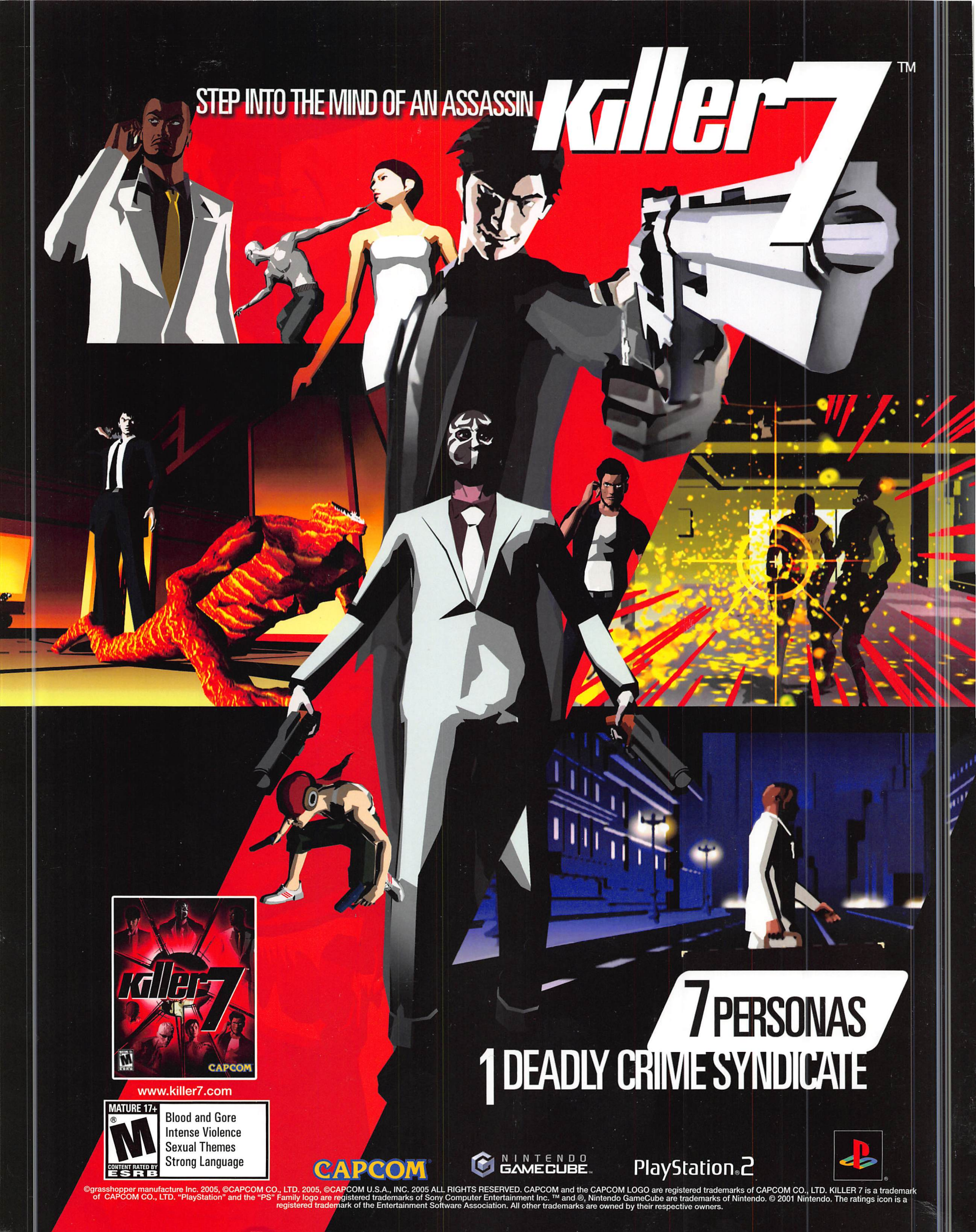
They're that good.



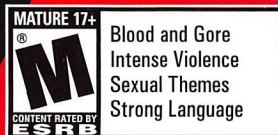
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PlayStation 2



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